

I Was a Sword When I Reincarnated

– Tensei Shitara Ken Deshita –

- Volume 5 -

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[CardboardTL]



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"I became the sword by transmigrating"

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Chapter 185

Reunion

[You ready to get going?]

“Nn.”

We had breakfast, checked to make sure all our equipment was in good form, and headed out.

Our destination was one of the many venues in which the tournament would be hosted. The tournament had actually started yesterday, but today was more so the one Fran had been looking forward to, as it had finally come time for her first match. According to the schedule we got from Dias, the tournament was to last for 14 days, with the first 4 dedicated to the preliminaries. The preliminaries were defined as a 2 step process, with each of the 2 taking up half the allotted time.

Over 1000 people had signed up for the tourney, and thus, there simply wasn't enough to time for the preliminaries to be done in the usual 1 on 1 style. They were instead organised such that they'd allow for four people to be eliminated at once. That is, the preliminaries consisted solely of 5 person battle royales in which only the last man standing would be allowed to progress.

Not surprisingly, the tournament's managers knew exactly what they were doing. They understood that the only way for them to complete all 200 plus preliminary matches within the 2 day timebox was for them to have multiple matches running at once. Thus, they had set up a series of locations around town in order to facilitate the process, a feat only made capable precisely because the tournament happened to take place in Ulmutt. Ulmutt was unique in the sense that it existed for and because of adventurers. Hence, its city plan included a great number of open areas that often saw use as as training or dueling grounds.

The second preliminary round would have far fewer participants than the first, and thus, they had it hosted within a pair of larger stadiums instead of a bunch of smaller ones scattered all over. Unlike the first, the second also allowed for spectators.

The main event consisted of 6 rounds, which meant a total of 64 participants. About 50 of the combatants typically came from the prelims. The rest were seeded and thereby excluded from the qualification process.

Interestingly, killing one's opponent was not actually considered a crime, as you weren't allowed to participate in the tournament unless you signed a waiver. Said waiver included a statement about the fact that you knew you were going into something that might lead to your death. Honestly, I'm not really sure what else I should've expected from a world as violent as this one.

That said, I had to admit that it wasn't actually as bad as it may have otherwise seemed. After all, health potions were a thing, so you probably wouldn't die unless you were killed instantly. That said, the organisers only really supplied that kinda stuff to the main event's participants. You could say it was rather cold hearted for them to not assist those that got eliminated early on, but I couldn't really blame or antagonize them for it. Culling the weak was kind of what this tournament was all about in the first place. Besides, distributing potions to all thousand or so participants would probably put the organisers well in the red, so it was honestly only fair. There was also always healing magic for people that couldn't afford potions, though again, healers weren't really something supplied to people participating in the prelims.

Speaking of which, healing magic was precisely what made it possible for the tourney to take over the course of such a short time period. Its effects were more or less instant, so injured participants didn't have to wait for their injuries to heal. All they needed was for someone to say the word, and they'd be back in tip top shape.

[You feeling nervous at all?]

"Nn. Fine."

Fran nodded. We'd done everything we could these past few days to get ourselves as ready as we could possibly be, and so, the look on her face almost seemed to be the spitting image of confidence.

[I'll just stay on the sidelines and watch unless we run into someone really strong. Alright?]

"Nn. Want to know how far we can go."

Fran wanted to both test her own strength and see how much stronger she was when we fought together.

There was still a decent bit of time before the match started, so we walked through town at a rather leisurely pace. The venue we were headed to happened to be right by the guild, so we weren't even the slightest bit worried about getting lost.

I made use of our travel time by explaining to Fran the tourney's rules.

Given that this was a martial arts tournament, an event that almost seemed to ooze with violence, there weren't actually all that many restrictions. We just had to be careful not to consume any potions mid-combat, and we were pretty much good. There weren't any rules against any skills and spells, you were pretty much allowed to do whatever. The only thing one would probably want to avoid would be the Evil Arts, as using them would more likely than not cause one to get instantly mobbed by any and all nearby adventurers.

The only part of the rules that we really had to pay attention to was the part that detailed what you could and couldn't do with summons. Any non-human summons were in fact allowed, but only under the condition that they weren't summoned ahead of time. In other words, we could bring Urushi so long as we had him hide in Fran's shadow and have him not come out until she pretended to summon him. The reason that this was in fact legal, and not against the rules, was because they stated that rules regarding summons applied not just to summons, but also to anything else that happened to function in a similar manner. Specifically, the rules would apply so long as the creature you called was initially either not present or hidden from sight.

Fortunately, there weren't any restrictions with regards to magic items, you could use whatever you wanted. It seemed that what this tournament cared about wasn't one's base stats, but rather how strong one was with all one's gear and familiars factored in as well.

There were only two possible ways to get disqualified. The first was to leave the ring, and the second, to deliberately attack someone that'd already surrendered.

Fran looked at all the stalls around her as she slowly made her way forwards, but as one could expect, not even she was enough of a glutton to start chowing down the moment before she had to fight her first match.

[You can eat as much as you want after we're done, so sit tight for now, alright?]

"Nn."

She continued glancing at the stalls in our vicinity despite voicing her agreement. It was simply something that couldn't be helped. Stalls started appearing en masse the moment the tournament began, and their merchandise honestly looked nothing short of delicious.

Her staring any longer would only serve to tempt her, so I had her rush back over to the guild. I didn't think we'd end up stopping on our way there given that she'd hit the gas, but for some odd reason, we did.

[Is something the matter, Fran?]

"That."

I looked in the direction Fran's finger was pointing, only to find a stall that almost seemed a bit familiar.

[Wait, isn't that... The Dragon's Table?]

The Dragon's Table, one of the stores that'd competed against us back in Barbra, had a stall set up right by the Adventurer's Guild. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that they seemed to be selling the Dragon Bone Soup they happened to be famous for. Standing behind the counter was a familiar face, a tall, A ranked adventurer by the name of Fermus. He was looking just as sharp as he was the last time we saw him.

"Oh, well if it isn't the Black Tail's Fran."

"Nn. Long time no see."

"It has been quite a while. Are you perhaps here in order to participate in the tournament?"

"Nn."

"Well, then please do try your best."

Fran ended up speaking with Fermus till we had to go.

It turned out that he was also taking part in the tourney. But as one would expect of a former A ranked adventurer, he'd been seeded and wouldn't be going through the prelims.

"I would normally opt out of participating seeing as my age is what it is, but this year happens to be a bit special, as one of my acquaintances asked me to participate. I was unable to turn him down because I owed him a favour."

He had nothing to do in the meantime, so he ended up deciding to set up shop for publicity's sake. I had to say, Fermus seemed really into this whole merchanting thing. Dude's spirit was brimming with entrepreneurship.

Well, that's one more powerful foe we might end up running into. He's literally killed dragons. Like shit, no way in hell we'll be able to beat him easily.

Fermus also told us a bunch about what happened to Barbra in the event's aftermath. The former Lords, the Krystens, had effectively thrown away their fortune by using it to fund the city's reconstruction. The guild had helped out as well, so the reconstruction was pretty much right on schedule.

Amanda's support had allowed the orphanage to get back on its feet, which in turn allowed Io go all out and do cook to the best of her ability. The soup Io made was ridiculously delicious despite the fact that she used nothing but super low quality vegetables in it. I really couldn't help but wonder just how delicious the stuff she was making now was, given that she finally had access to all the spices and condiments she could ever dream of.

Last but not least, he mentioned that Barbra was currently going through what could only be described as a curry boom. People were setting up curry stalls all over and naming them after our own. They'd call themselves the X Tail, or the Black Y, with X and Y being substituted out for random words. Many of these stalls would claim that they'd inherited our recipes, which I guess wasn't entirely false seeing as how I'd handed the recipe over to the Chef's Guild and told them to do whatever with it.

Fran was really engaged in the conversation, and seemed really interested in everything else Fermus had to say, but we had to go.

[Hey Fran, it's time.]

"Nn. Time for match."

"Well, I won't keep you any longer then. Sorry for the hold up."

"Not problem. Wanted to talk about Barbra."

"Great. Then I'll look forward to trading blows with you in the ring."

"Nn. Got it."

"Fufu. You sure do seem eager."

It seemed that Fermus' words had flipped Fran's switch, as the smile she flashed him was one filled with drive and battlelust.

Welp, here's to hoping she doesn't hit the people we'll be facing in the prelims too too hard.

Chapter 186

The First Preliminary Round

Upon arriving, we found the venue to be surprisingly quiet. Further consideration made me feel like I'd stated the obvious given that the first preliminary round wasn't actually open to the public.

Men we presumed to be adventurers were entering and leaving the building, their bodies exuding auras of passion and excitement.

[It looks like they're handling all the reception stuff over by the entrance.]

"Nn."

Fran approached the receptionist in her usual, calm manner, with Urushi hidden in her shadow. He'd actually chosen to hide there on his own volition, as he knew he would've ended up having to do once we got into the waiting room anyways.

"I'm sorry, we aren't allowing spectators today. The second preliminary round starts tomorrow. You'll have to come back then."

The receptionist did the usual thing and treated Fran as a non-participant despite the fact that she had me shouldered. It seemed that the receptionist had thought Fran to be an adventurer that'd just joined up or something.

I was a bit confused as to why the receptionist didn't recognize Fran given the guild had announced that she'd hit C rank and all that. I only came to understand exactly why it'd happened after appraising the receptionist and finding out that he wasn't actually associated with the guild, and was instead a civil servant working under the local lord.

"Participant."

"R-Really? What's your name?"

“Fran.”

“Let’s see... Oh, there it is. Wait, you really are participating in the tournament?”

“Nn.”

“Are you sure you want to? There aren’t any healing services available for the first preliminary round, so you can get hurt really badly. It’s okay for you to back out if you want.”

The receptionist seemed like a pretty good guy, but he wasn’t really doing Fran any favours. That said, she wasn’t getting irritated either, seeing as how she could tell that he was only saying what he was because he was actually concerned for her safety.

“Not problem.”

“I’m serious. It really is dangerous, alright?”

“Thanks. Bye.”

“Make sure you surrender if you feel like you’re outclassed, okay!? And do it before you get hurt! It’ll be too late for you to regret your choices if you do!”

The receptionist wasn’t able to leave his desk, so he ended up voicing his concerns by shouting them at Fran as she headed inside.



Meeting the receptionist was pretty much the only hiccup we encountered along the way; everything that happened thereafter went rather smoothly. The person that showed us around after we got inside was an old adventurer, one skilled enough to tell that Fran was much stronger than she looked.

In fact, he’d even ended up looking at the other participants with a look of pity, as most seemed to be grinning at her as if she was mere prey.

“Heh. Looks like the last participant’s just a brat!”

“I guess that means this’ll effectively just be a 4 way free for all then.”

“You do know that this tournament isn’t some sort of game, right? I’m supposed to be winning it big and making a name for myself, not playing with some kid.”

The other 4 participants were already present. Half of them looked like mercenaries, and the other half like adventurers.

All but 1 of the participants had ended up looking down on Fran. The sole individual to regard her with a stern gaze was also the only person bothered appraising immediately. It turned out that he was actually a decently strong adventurer; his stats indicated that he was at least D ranked, which in turn meant he probably knew exactly who we were.

“Take your places, we’ll soon begin.”

The old man that guided us over immediately began acting like a referee. However, he was interrupted by the less skilled adventurer before he could continue giving directions.

He approached the old man and asked him to remove Fran from the fight.

“Look, I get that kid’s qualified for this and all, but she really shouldn’t be here. I’m only taking part in this tournament in order to make myself famous. I’ll probably end up going down in infamy instead if word gets out that I ended up hurting a little girl like her just to get past the preliminaries!”

“Say what you want. I don’t have the authority to disqualify her.”

“Hey kid! Back out, right now! This is a martial arts tournament, not some sort of children’s game!”

He likely would have continued yelling at us if the other adventurer hadn’t called out to him.

“I’m guessing you just got here then?”

“Arrived yesterday. What of it?”

“I see...”

The more skilled of the two adventurers breathed a bit of a sigh. He seemed to have guessed that the other adventurer had only just in Ulmutt, and hence, had yet to hear about Fran. From that, he determined that convincing the other man was impossible, so he instead turned towards the judge and urged him to start the match.

“We should probably begin if you want the tourney to stay on schedule.”

“Come on! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Look, man, you’re wasting everyone’s time. If you don’t want to fight the kid, then just forfeit.”

“He’s right. You’re getting really annoying.”

“What did you say!?”

The two mercenaries joined the fray, which ultimately caused the four men to enter a staring contest in which they all glared at one another.

(Master. Can’t just send flying?)

[Not right now. You’ll end up getting disqualified if you do.]

Fran was starting to get a bit frustrated.

The old man responsible for doing all the rep work seemed to feel the same way; he started the match because he didn’t really want to put up with everyone’s bickering.

“The match will begin in 5, 4, 3—”

“Hey, wait, what the hell!”

“—2, 1, start! “

And so, the match ended up starting despite the weaker adventurer’s complaints.

Both mercenaries immediately kicked off the moment the ref said the word ‘start.’

“Heh heh heh. Best thing to do at a time like this...”

“...Is to immediately team up and jump the strongest guy!”

Though both mercs were rather weak, they still did have a fair amount of experience in combat. As they worked in the same field, the two established a mutual understanding and immediately began working together.

I'd always thought of mercenaries to be the type of people that were capable of using all sorts of different weapons, but weak nonetheless. However, after being presented with live samples, I came to realize that they were in fact individuals rather skilled at cooperating. My guess was that they were most likely even more skilled than adventurers were in that regard.

The weaker adventurer immediately reacted to their words.

“Kuh! How cowardly! I can't believe you'd gang up on me right off the bat!”

Wait, did he seriously think that he was the one that was going to get ganged? Just how in the world did someone as weak as him end up with *that* much confidence? Dude's been rattling on about getting famous and all that, but as far as I could tell, his attitude wasn't backed by his ability. I didn't understand why he assumed he'd be actually able to get past the first round of the prelims.

“First up is you!”

“Oraaahh! Go to hell!”

The individual the two mercenaries immediately approached was naturally the more powerful of the two adventurers; they closed in on him from both directions while swinging their blades. Their choice seemed logical, as the man did give off the sense that he was rather strong.

But they were simply too weak in comparison. Both were sent flying out of bounds with a single swing of the adventurer's sword.

“No way!”

“He was way too strong!”

Fran faced off against the other adventurer in the meantime. He really seemed to be the type of guy who wasn't good at reading the mood, as he ended up trying to convince her to forfeit even now.

"Listen here kid. I hit ranked all the way up to E faster than of Corrent Village's other adventurers. There's no way a little girl like you could possibly match up to my genius! Forfeit, walk yourself out of bounds right now if you don't want me to hurt you. This is your final warning, you hear!"

Did he end up turning out the way he did because the tiny ass village he came from thought him to be a genius or something? Is that how all this happened?

"So yo—"

"Shut up."

Fran interrupted the weaker adventurer by kicking him in the stomach and sending him flying so far he almost fell out of bounds.

"Urgh!!"

He held his stomach and looked up at Fran with eyes filled with disbelief as he vomited all sorts of different things. It seemed he was incapable of comprehending the fact that she'd just sent him flying about 10 meters back.

"Will get serious next time if you still want to fight."

"Hiiii..."

The adventurer lying on the ground in front of us was rather unskilled, but, even he could feel the aura of intimidation that Fran's body had began exuding. He finally shut up and immediately rolled himself right out of bounds without even bothering to voice anything about shame or dishonor.

[Why'd you purposefully make him not go out of bounds?]

(Stupid and annoying, but wasn't bad person.)

For that reason, she'd intentionally allowed him to choose whether or not he wanted to back off as opposed to just sending him flying further. I got where she was coming from, but honestly, I almost wanted to say that the way she did it was even more cruel than just finishing him in one hit. The way she attacked him made it so he wouldn't be able to make excuses or say that he'd been caught off guard, which in turn might've just broke his spirit and made him lose heart.

"I knew this would be how things turned out..."

"Nn."

"I doubt I'll be able to triumph over you, but I will at least get a hit in!"

He drew his blade and attacked in a fluid, skillful motion, but failed to damage Fran regardless.

She swung her left fist, smacked him with a counter, broke his stance, and caused him to collapse on the spot.

"How... mortifying..."

And so, Fran ended up moving onto the second round of the preliminaries.

Chapter 187

In the Waiting Room

Today was the day we would fight our second preliminary match.

Its location, a large stadium, was practically the exact opposite of the the puny training ground in which we'd fought the first round.

The first round's 1000 plus participants had been cut down to a measly 240. Soon, that 240 would be further reduced all the way down to 48.

The participants were split into 2 groups of 120, with each assigned to one of the two larger stadiums the event was to be hosted in. Both stadiums were known to get pretty full seeing as how the second preliminary round not only functioned as the first round open to spectators, but also the only public round that featured battle royale style matches. The 5 FFA format was actually quite popular, as people thought it fresh compared to the standard 1v1 format used throughout the rest of the tourney.

Another reason spectators enjoyed flocking to both this round and the tournament as a whole was the fact that one could gamble. Everyone other than the match's participants would be allowed to bet to their hearts' content. Participants were banned from placing bets in order to discourage them from fixing their matches. Match fixing was considered a serious crime and any found guilty of it would be put to death.

In my world, gambling had been an act that was often associated with organized crime and the underworld as a whole, but that apparently wasn't something we had to be concerned with. Dias was rather strict, he was known for cracking down on and preventing it. Larger criminal organisations would always be destroyed the moment they were discovered. Smaller scaled organisations sometimes managed to find themselves staying off the radar, but none of them held nearly enough power to have their way.

Plus, the Adventurer's Guild was the entity responsible for all the bookkeeping. They possessed the power, authority, and talent necessary to make sure nothing happened,

so there really wasn't much to worry about.

[Alright, let's go.]

"Nn."

We still had a fair chunk of time before Fran's match began, but apparently, all participants actually needed to arrive earlier than was scheduled. Hence, we'd planned to spend about 30 minutes in the venue's waiting room.

Fran didn't actually seem nervous. She was still her usual taciturn self despite the upcoming second preliminary round. Since we had a bit more time to spare today, she even ended up buying and eating a bunch of stuff on her way over to the stadium.

[Man, this place is huge.]

"Nn."

The venue was a massive cylindrical building that looked almost exactly like a colosseum. Today was our first time viewing it from up close, but I could feel the excitement contained within nonetheless. The sheer hype amount of hype that filled the arena was only evidenced by the ridiculously loud cheers we heard booming out from within.

Fran headed inside through the combatants' entrance at the building's rear. Today's receptionist seemed to be the kind that had their shit together, and so, we managed to make into the waiting room without anyone stopping us in our tracks. All of the other participants immediately turned towards Fran the moment she entered the waiting room. Most regarded her with surprise, contempt, or a sense of bewilderment, but she ignored them and found herself a seat.

To her, this was only normal.

There were a total of 5 different waiting waiting rooms. The tournament's organisers had intentionally made it so people wouldn't run into their opponents prior to actually entering the arena in order to minimize the amount of potential conflict. They'd also even gone as far as to set a rule stating that combat was banned within the waiting rooms' confines.

“The hell’s a brat like you doing here? Scram!”

Unfortunately, people were people, and rules weren’t always respected.

One of the second round’s participants immediately started blabbing off to Fran despite the fact that he would’ve realized that she wasn’t just some random kid if he’d so much as just used his brain. A mere moment worth of thought would’ve allowed him to realize that she’d had to at least have some ability given that she’d gotten through the first preliminary round.

The man in question, a dude with a vulgar look on his face, went out of his way to rise to his feet and approach Fran. The fact that combat was against the rules put me at a loss. I wasn’t really sure how to handle the situation given that we weren’t allowed to do the usual thing and just smack him to shut him up.

It turned out that Fran didn’t share my sentiments. She knew exactly what to do, as evidenced by the fact that she activated all her intimidation-type skills without a moment’s hesitation. That is, she immediately filled the *entire room* with an incredible amount of pressure.

[Hey Fran, you’re going a bit overboard there.]

“Nn?”

Fran’s aura had caused many of the other participants to rise to their feet with the faces paled and their weapons drawn out of sheer habit — and they’d only been been hit with collateral damage.

The man Fran had been aiming her bloodlust at had lost control of his legs and fallen flat on his ass. He was trembling in fear and almost on the verge of passing out.

“Nn.”

“Hii...”

He even went as far as immediately scuttling backwards the moment Fran laid eyes on him.

Welp. It getting all quiet was good and all, but I kinda felt bad for what we did to all

the other contestants.

They weren't able to relax until after Fran cancelled the skills and bowed her head in apology. That said, their expressions had ultimately ended up remaining stern; most seemed to have come to understand their own relative weakness.

Yup, she definitely went overboard.

Everyone present remained dead silent, which in turn made the cheers coming from the colosseum's arena sound strangely distant. Fran, however, literally didn't give a shit. She simply sat down, pulled a glass of juice out of her dimensional storage, and started drinking it with an innocent look on her face like it was nobody's business.

The atmosphere ended up remaining as is until another contestant ended up entering the room.

"Oh hey, well if it isn't the Magic Sword Girl."

"Nn? Lydia?"

"Hey, long time no see. So you're taking part in the tourney too?"

The girl that walked into the otherwise tense room was Lydia, an adventurer we met back in Barbra, and a member of the Scarlet Maidens. She was fairly easy to recognize, as her face was currently decorated with its usual expressionless mask.

The fact that she was here immediately led me to assume that the other two members of her party were also actively participating.

"Judith and Maia here too?"

"Yup, they've also both signed up for the tourney. Judith's over in one of the other rooms. Maia had to go to the other venue instead. But seriously, whew."

"Nn?"

"Well, it's just that you being here means I won't have to worry about fighting you."

Lydia had seen the extent of Fran's strength back in Barbra, so learning that she

wouldn't have to fight her had caused the older girl to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Our goal is to make it past the preliminaries."

"Not win?"

"That's just not something that's going to happen. Both Colbert and Forrund are going to be participating, and there's no way any of us could even imagine matching up to them. To be honest, we're just entering in order to make ourselves better known so people won't look down on us. Our party only has girls in it, so it's a necessary measure."

The reason the Scarlet Maidens had decided to take part in the tourney seemed like one of the more common ones. It did make sense though. Getting filtered through the preliminaries despite the tournament's scale really would serve to evidence one's skill to some extent. I mean, that was interesting and all, but I cared much less about the reasons he was participating than I did about the other participants she had just mentioned.

"Colbert and Forrund participating too?"

After all, it seemed that two more powerful opponents had joined the fray.

"Uhmhhh... Could you not smile like that? It's kinda scary!"

Hearing that Colbert and Forrund had come seemed to light both Fran's spirit and her desire to fight aflame, as she immediately smiled a belligerent smile.

"Oh, yeah! Congrats on ranking up! The fact that you're already a C ranker is really impressive."

"Thanks."

"Please go easy on me if we happen to happen to get matched up against each other after the prelims are done with. Please try not to hurt me, 'kay?"

"Nn."

"I'll hold you to it then! I swear I'll get really mad if you make me hurt all over!"

I honestly couldn't tell if Lydia was weak or strong from a psychological standpoint. But either way, Fran ended up getting called shortly after the two started to converse.

The clerk that called for us led us through a narrow passageway. Blinding sunlight flooded into it as we made our way through; it almost seemed to emphasize that the arena lay beyond.

[Are you ready, Fran?]

"Nn."

[This is your last chance to avoid garnering the Beast Lord's attention, so if you want to back out, it'll be now or never.]

"Won't forfeit."

[You sure? Even though the Beast Lord might end up making note of you?]

"Nn!"

The Beast Lord had broken Fran's spirit and left her trembling thereafter simply by standing before her.

But it didn't matter.

Fran didn't care that the actions she was about to take were ones that could ultimately attract his attention. The moment she learned of Kiara's fate was the moment she threw away the very consideration of backing down. Doing so, running away with her tail between her legs, had become equivalent to casting away her tribe's pride.

And that, she simply refused to do.

[Go all out, do whatever it is you want. Don't worry about the Beast Lord. We can always just teleport the hell away, find ourselves a ship, and sail off to another continent if really need be. But that's not something you'll have to worry about, I'll take care of everything if worse comes to worst, so don't let your fears hold you back.]

"Thanks."

[Alright, that's all I had to say.]

There was no point in dwelling on what ifs. All we needed to do for now was focus on and conquer the second preliminary round.

[Let's do this!]

“Nn!”

Chapter 188

The Second Preliminary Round

Fran pumped herself up and stepped into the arena, only to be greeted by a stage of epic proportions, one so massive and well decorated that it simply couldn't be compared to the dingy *thing* used in the first preliminary round. Its construction consisted of two parts, a round platform and the larger cylindrical wall that enclosed it, a large cylindrical wall. Around the arena were enough seats to fit over a thousand spectators. The place was beyond packed; every single seat was filled and then some.

Our entrance was welcomed by a set cheers from the audience, cheers so deafeningly loud that they caused my blade to tremble in response.

In spite of all that, Fran was as usual; she literally didn't care about her surroundings.

Three of our four foes already stood atop the stage, one of which we happened to recognize.

"Huh? Fran!?"

"Judith?"

"Oh come on! Now I'm sure to lose!"

Judith fell forward onto her knees the moment she realized she was up against us. It was an action I honestly couldn't blame her for. There was basically no way for her to win given how the fact that Fran was way stronger than she was...

Apparently she wasn't the only one to have recognized Fran, as the other contestants had also adopted similar expressions of unease.

"So that's the Magic Sword Girl...? Huh, she really was just a kid."

"Don't let your guard down. Her ranks even higher than ours are. I hear she's a C ranker now."

The first round of the preliminaries seemed to have filtered out most of the weaker adventurers, as the only one of the contestants present understood that Fran was no weakling. The only one that failed to recognize her strength was the last to enter the ring.

“Hahahah! Why’s there a brat here? Isn’t this supposed to be a Martial Arts Tournament?”

The obnoxiously loud Blue Catkin that joined the fray laughed before taking a closer look at her and furrowing his brows.

“How the hell did *you* manage to get past the first round? Did you bribe all your opponents? Or were they just all pedophiles?”

“Strength.”

“Heh. Bullshit! You’re a god damned Black Catkin! No way in hell a wimp catkin like you could actually put up a decent fight. Know your place. Wait, I know. That old White Dogkin geezer must’ve pulled a few strings. That has to have been it.”

Getting a closer look at him allowed me to recognize that he was in fact a member of Blue Pride. Specifically, he was one of the two people that’d been standing by the gate and trying to convince Aurel to see them.

The realisation immediately explained why he was aggressive on both Fran and her benefactor.

“Just you wait, wimp cat. I’ll tear your jaw off so you can’t surrender, strip you nude and embarrassed the hell out of you before finally slowly beating you death.”

“...Talking really big for just *Blue Pride*.”

“Haah? What’d you just say?”

“You tried to visit aurel by lying and claiming you were famous, but you were turned away at the gates because your lie seen through right away. You’re just a group of weak, pathetic, small time mercenaries. And stay away from me. You stink.”

Fran seemed to have snapped given that she'd started speaking in longer, more drawn out sentences.

"You little bitch...!"

A large screen that resembled the kind you'd see in a sports stadium decorated one of the stadium's sides. It seemed to be some sort of magic item, as it was doing as a monitor would, and displayed a blown up version of the interaction that'd just occurred in real time.

The crowd's response to the Blue Catkin's remarks was rather poor. A few of the men had urged him on, but a greater number of women had ended up booing. Fran's rebuttal, on the other hand, had caused the entire stadium to erupt into cheers. The man immediately popped a vein in rage, but Fran just totally ignored him and everything he said from that point onward, which, as one might suspect, only caused him to get even angrier.

Their interaction was one the crowd really seemed to like, as its members began to jeer in an attempt to urge the two on.

With the mood set, the match finally began.

The Blue Catkin immediately locked his eyes to Fran's position and lunged straight at her. His skill with the sword wasn't too shabby, and he came at her with nothing held back; it was clear that he planned to kill her. His actions caused me to want to scoff at how childish he was. He ended up completely losing all sense of rationality just because of the slightest bit of mockery.

Though, that much, I'd honestly expected.

What I didn't expect, however, was for the three other contestants to join him. They all immediately decided to cooperate in order to eliminate Fran, as, the Blue Catkin aside, they were aware that she was the strongest in the group. Judith happened to stand out from her peers, as she purposefully placed herself at the rear so she could use the other three contestants as meat shields.

Both Fran and I were rather impressed by her actions. She hadn't given up on winning despite the fact that she knew we'd be able to overwhelm her.

The unexpected four versus one situation put Fran in what could be thought of a numerical disadvantage, but she didn't mind. Fran simply didn't care that all four other contestants had ganged up her. She didn't complain, nor did she bother calling any of the four out for unfairness.

Instead, she simply retaliated.

"Fmph."

"Guahhh!"

She swung me without bothering to draw my blade from its sheath and hit the Blue Catkin right in the jaw. The impact caused him to fly into the air before spiraling back down towards the ground.

Fran then struck again; she used the rising momentum that accompanied her first strike in order to deliver a powerful horizontal blow.

"Heavy Slash."

"Kyaah!"

"What!?"

"Gyaaahhh!"

Heavy Slash was considered a relatively low tier skill, but it'd proven to be more than effective enough given just how powerful Fran had become. The attack sent the swordsman and spearman that followed the Blue Catkin tumbling back into Judith. Neither of the three were capable of recovering from the attack and so, they were all forced out of bounds.

Only a few seconds had passed, but Fran had already eliminated three of her four opponents. She could've easily done the same to the last of the bunch, but instead, intentionally chose to draw out her assault.

"Hiiii! F-Fwelp me...!"

She swung me downwards. In doing so, she caught the Blue Catkin in midair, smashed

him into the ground, and caused a dull crack to reverberate through it.

“Gahiii... fuaarghh...!”

The blood in the Blue Catkin’s mouth rendered him incapable of anything but a few groans. He’d barely managed to hang onto his consciousness, not because he was sturdy, but because Fran had made sure to hold back just enough for him to do so.

“I... huwwenda! I huwwenda!”

“Don’t understand.”

“Horheit!”

“Still don’t understand.”

Well, yeah, it’s kinda hard for him to actually speak given that he doesn’t have a jaw or chin anymore.

“I horheit da hatsh!”

“Too stupid to know how to surrender? Well, can’t be helped since Blue Catkin.”

Fran basically totally admitted to knowing exactly what he was trying to say, but it didn’t matter. What did was the fact that she’d done onto him exactly what he claimed he’d wanted to do to her.

“Should strip and humiliate you?”

“Hiiii! I’m hwory! I’m hworry! Pweave, htop! Haf murhy!”

The sheer amount of bloodlust Fran’d been emanating caused the Blue Catkin to become as scared as he could possibly be; a warm, wet patch spread across his nether regions as he deliriously begged for her forgiveness.

Naturally, the referee had realized that the match couldn’t go on, and so, he hurried over to the stage and attempted to climb atop it.

Fran noticed him approach, so she immediately moved to deliver the finishing blow

before he could stop her.

“Will end as requested.”

“Gobaaaarrrgggh!”

She muttered a few words under her breath while swinging me like a golf club and sending the Blue Catkin fly right off the stage. She seemed to have gone a bit overboard, as he soared for what looked like 10 whole meters before finally hitting the ground.

I was a bit worried that the crowd would end up finding her actions distasteful, but it turned out that they actually ended up liking them as they immediately broke into applause.

“And it’s over! The young lady just pulled off the impossible and sent a full grown man flying off the stage with just one hit! Ain’t that just incredible ladies and gentlemen? It’s not something you’d expect from someone with such a cute face, that’s for sure!”

Wait, there’s been a shoutcaster this whole time? How the hell did I not notice?

The caster’s announcement caused the crowd to break out into an extra loud cheer.

“And with that C rank adventurer Fran, the Magic Sword Girl, wins the 11th west block and secures herself a spot in the main event without even drawing the blade she’s nicknamed after!”

Chapter 189

The Brackets

“Congratulations, Miss Fran. You have earned the right to participate in the main event.”

“Nn.”

Fran ended up having to visit what almost looked to be yet another waiting room after winning the match. There, she was met by a clerk who explained how things would work from here on out.

The tournament wasn't set to start till the day after tomorrow, but, tomorrow was going to be a busy day regardless. The matchups and brackets were to be posted in the morning and an opening ceremony was to take place around noon. The tournament's participants didn't actually have to participate in the opening ceremony. In fact, the clerk's tone made it seemed like we were or more or less discouraged from doing so, which honestly only made sense. Putting a bunch of hot blooded warriors in one spot sounded like a terrible idea no matter how you spun it.

They pushed the idea even further by stating that copies of the brackets would be delivered straight to the inn we were staying at so we wouldn't even have head out in order to check them.

To us, not having to attend the ceremony was nothing short of a blessing. Fran wasn't the type of girl that'd be able to sit still while nobles and other bigwigs went about with their long speeches and whatnot. Plus, the Beast Lord was pretty much guaranteed to be present as a VIP of sorts, and being around him didn't quite seem like what one would call the best idea ever.

We were also informed that the main tournament's participants would be given preferential treatment at all smithies throughout the city for the event's duration. Injuries could be fixed on the spot with ease. All one would need to do to restore themselves to perfect health was to either chug a potion or two, or have someone cast a few healing spells. Gear, however, couldn't really be fixed unless you took it in for

maintenance.

Luckily, there wasn't too much new information to absorb, so we ended up leaving the arena not too long after our victory — only to immediately run into Judith.

“Hey Fran. It looked like I really didn't even stand a chance.”

“Not hurt?”

“Haha... Only because you held back enough for me not to be.”

The way she spoke made it clear that she was feeling a bit down. Fran had no idea what to say given the circumstances, and so, she just ended up not saying anything at all. Instead, she simply looked at the other girl with a bit of a troubled expression.

“Oh uh, sorry, don't mind me. I just wanted to wish you good luck and to tell you to give it your all, in part for my sake.”

“Nn.”

“Oh, and make sure you win the first round! I'll be betting all the spare cash I have on you!”

“Might fight Lydia if she wins prelims.”

“That doesn't matter! I'll still be betting on you anyway”

Judith smiled cheerfully while giving us a thumbs up.

With that, we departed, our minds and hearts filled with Judith's half sincere, half greed-driven words of encouragement.

“Will do best.”

[That you should, for Judith's wallet's sake.]



The tournament brackets were delivered to us the next afternoon.

We immediately began looking them over the moment we got them. The brackets were split into four distinct blocks, labeled A, B, C, and D respectively. Each naturally contained 16 of the tourney's 64 contestants.

Fran'd been placed in slot A-11, which... honestly didn't really mean much to us. It told us who we were up against and all, but did nothing to tell us how strong he or she was supposed to be.

[Looks like we're up against someone named Zefmate...?]

"Don't recognize."

[He isn't seeded, so I guess that means he must've at least been strong enough to win his way through the prelims.]

We decided to put Zefmate aside for the time being and look into him a bit later on. I figured we'd at least be able to learn a bit about his fighting style if we just asked Erza.

After shelving the thought and putting something on our to-do list, Fran and I immediately looked over all the seeded combatants.

"Forrund and Amanda."

[Royce and Goldalfa are on here too.]

The four A ranked adventurers looked to be the tourney's top seed, as their names were placed in the page's four corners. Though some tournaments involved having seeded individuals fight less matches, this one didn't. There were exactly 64 participants, so it was fair in the sense that each and every single individual would have to fight the exact same number of battles to win the event.

As were were in Block A, the first top seed we'd end up encountering, if any, would have to be Goldalfa, one of the Beast Lord's escorts. He was in the same block as us, and specifically had been placed in slot A-1. Block A's second seed, Colbert, had been placed opposite him in slot A-16.

Having 16 seeded combatants meant that there were naturally four in each block. They all seemed to be quite strong, but Goldalfa and Colbert, the ones we'd have to fight, seemed especially intimidating. Both were capable of bringing Fran to the verge of death with a single strike. Fortunately, we knew about both their abilities to an extent, so we could at least begin thinking up how we could best deal with them ahead of time.

The first of the two we would face would be Colbert, which in turn meant we'd need to be able to do something about opponents that made use of Martial Arts. But again, he wasn't the only person we needed to defeat. There were so just many people we needed to look up and do research on — a fact that worried me to the point where I'd started doing mental laps.

"Kufu."

Fran, however, wasn't. The possibility of having to go up against one of the Beast Lord's guards failed to frighten or worry her. In fact, it'd done the exact opposite. Hearing that she might get to fight Goldafa had pushed her battlelust over the edge and caused her to break into a smile.

[So if we win the first round, we'll probably have to fight... Wait, seriously? Him?]

"Kurusu Ryuuzel? Don't really remember?"

[I'm not surprised you don't remember him, but he was that one C ranked guy that was there when we went dungeon diving with Amanda.]

"Nn?"

[Oh come. He was the one guy that kinda functioned as both a guide and examiner at the same time. Dude was kinda handsome, but almost seemed kinda pitiable given how worldly-wise he was. He must've seen some shit.]

"Maybe vaguely recalling?"

Welp... It didn't look like I'd be able to jog her memory, so I just gave up. I figured she'd *probably* remember him if she saw him. I was fairly confident Kurusu himself would likely recognize her on sight, as the impression she'd left on him had been a pretty

deep one. It'd probably get all awkward if Fran ended up treating him like a total stranger, so I decided to make a mental note to remind myself to remind her that she knew him the moment we came across him.

That said, the mental note I made wasn't really one I'd classified as anything even remotely close to high priority. There was a fair chance we wouldn't actually end up getting pit against Kurusu anyways. He would have to win against the individual seeded into slot A-9 in order to actually see us in the ring.

[Looks like Kurusu's going to to have to fight that old guy, Radyer.]

"Said he was C ranked?"

[Yeah, but he's apparently as strong as a B ranker and even used to serve as a court magician.]

Radyer getting seeded honestly seemed nothing short of reasonable. I kinda felt a bit sorry for Kurusu; I really couldn't see him winning against the old mage.

"Radyer will win."

Fran voiced her agreement.

Well, I guess we'll have to figure out how to best fight mages if we wanted to beat Radyer.

[And if we manage to make it past Radyer, we'll have to face off against Colbert.]

"Nn! Will need to try hard. Excited."

Colbert was much more experienced than us, and even had a trick or two up his sleeve. He'd had something that disguised his stats, so we didn't even know if the values we'd seen back then had really been his actual ones. All I really knew about him was that he had that a mysterious martial arts-type skill referred to as Dimitris-Style Martial Arts, which was yet another thing we'd have to look into.

[And if we beat Colbert, we'll have to fight Goldalfa.]

"Nn."

Goldalfa, like Colbert, seemed to be fairly strong, so I didn't doubt that he'd win his first three matches. I wasn't really confident as to whether or not we'd be able to bring him down ourselves; there was a fair chance he'd be able to plow through us and win his fourth match as well.

"Will win!"

[Hell yeah we will!]

If we did beat him, then I'd say we actually had a fair chance of actually winning the whole goddamn tourney. He, as an A ranked adventurer, was someone strong enough to single handedly upset the balance of a country's military power so it went without saying that he was a likely contender for the championship title.

[Though, beating him isn't really going to get us out of fighting all the other A ranked adventurers present.]

If all went well, Fran would have to fight Amanda in the semis, and Forrund in the finals, the realisation of which practically left her trembling in excitement. Both gave off the impression that they were even stronger than Goldalfa, especially since we'd witnessed their power first hand back in Barbra.

"But will still win."

[That we will.]

They were extremely formidable, but I refused to back down. There was no point in me doing so if Fran actually intended on giving it her all. After all, victory was something that necessitated the right mindset; there was no way for us win unless we fought with that precise purpose in mind.

[Fuck yeah! Let's do this!]

"Master?"

[I was just getting myself pumped, cause we're gunna win this shit!]

"Nn!"

We'd identified what seemed to be our main threats, but that didn't mean we could actually let our guards down. As there were many other strong contestants, there was a chance we could be caught off guard and completely obliterated by someone we hadn't expected to fight if we didn't remain vigilant.

Having come to that conclusion, we decided to once again look through the brackets in order to identify our acquaintances.

The first name that happened to catch our eyes was Fermus'. He happened to be in Block D together with Royce.

The second name we noticed was Erza's. It seemed the tournament was fairly flexible and its managers were willing to accommodate people's needs, as they hadn't listed him by his real name. Erza, like Amanda, was placed in the Block B. I kinda wanted to see the two fight, but also kinda didn't, as it'd likely be a showdown that'd determine which was the more fearsome woman.

The third name that caught our eye was the name "Phillip Krysten," which happened to be listed alongside Forrund's in Block C. I was a bit unsure as to whether or not he should actually be here given Barbra's status quo, but figured he probably had his reasons for participating. Plus, he honestly had seemed pretty damned strong given what he was able to do to Rynford, so I was looking forward to seeing the full extent of abilities; Phillip vs Forrund was a match I didn't want to miss.

Our eyes moved around the page a bit more and located the name Charlotte. I recalled her immediately. She was the young War Dancer that'd helped us out back in Barbra. She seemed to me like the type of person that'd fight through the rituals she performed with her dance as opposed to engaging in direct combat... which wouldn't really help her given that her first match was against Erza. I felt pretty bad for her, so I at least, in my mind, offered her my heartfelt condolences.

Her name was the last familiar one we found.

The person we'd been looking for hadn't made the list.

"Lydia missing."

Wait, didn't she ask Fran not to hurt her too much if they came across each other

during the main event and all that? How could she actually not make it after saying something like that?

God damn it, Lydia! What the hell!?

Chapter 190

Gathering Intel

Fran and I stopped by the Adventurer's Guild not too long after we finished staring down the brackets. Our goal was to figure out as much as we could with regards to all the other participants.

"Erza not here."

[I'm honestly not all that sure he would've told us what we wanted to know anyways.]

"Nn?"

[I mean, he's technically one of our competitors, you know? Though, I guess he does seem like he'd gladly comply so long as it's you that's asking...]

Relying on someone we might have to fight against for information just didn't sit quite right with me.

[How 'bout asking Dias or some other adventurers instead?]

"Got it."

Fran began moving towards a group of nearby adventurers so she could ask for a bit of information — only to be immediately denied the chance by the person she'd originally been looking for.

"Congratulations Fran! You did it! You made it to the main event!"

Erza dashed right over with a huge grin on his face, one so friendly it made me feel like an idiot for even considering him a rival of sorts.

"I watched your match! You did soooo well!"

"Nn."

“That Blue Catkin was really rude... You should’ve beat him up some more, mhm!”

“But might’ve been disqualified.”

“Oh... right, I almost forgot you weren’t allowed to attack people that’ve already surrendered. Oh well, I guess he gets off easy then... More importantly, Fran, something about you seems a bit different.”

“Nn?”

“Let’s see... It’s kinda like you’ve gotten a more reliable. You’ve really got this huge sense of presence.”

“Trained hard.”

“Is that really it? Mmm... I guess that does make sense. You seem like the type that’ll grow at an explosive rate the moment I take my eyes off of you. I’m sure the tournament will help you get way stronger.”

“Nn.”

“So what made you want to come to the guild today?”

“Wanted to research opponents.”

“Really? I always thought you were the type that wouldn’t really care who you were up against.”

“Intel very important.”

“Yup yup! Totally! As for the person you’ll be going up against first... Hmm... I don’t know anything about him.”

“Don’t know?”

“Mhm. I’ve never heard of any adventurers named Zefmate before.”

Erza not recognizing Zefmate meant two things: he wasn’t from Ulmutt and he wasn’t

anyone really famous.

“Let’s try asking someone else.”

Erza approached the adventurers seated at the bar and asked them if they knew of Zefmate.

“Do any of you know an adventurer named Zefmate?”

“Zefmate? Never heard of him.”

“Me either.”

None of the ten adventurers present had any idea who he was, which in turn led me to suspect that Zefmate wasn’t actually an adventurer given that some of the participants were in fact not.

There were also mercenaries, Knights like Phillip, mages, and other decently strong non-adventurers present as well.

[Alright, looks like he isn’t someone anyone around here knows. Let’s try switching gears.]

“Nn. Would like information on Dimitris-Style Martial Arts instead.”

“Oh my. Whyever would you need that?”

“Might have to fight person with it.”

“I didn’t know any of the tournament’s entrants knew how to use Dimitris-Style Martial Arts.”

“Don’t know why, but won’t use.”

“Oh, I guess that must mean the person you’re talking about is going through his trial.”

“Trial?”

“You didn’t know about the Dimitris Trial? They’re really famous. Anyone that wants

to be an official disciple has to go through one of them. The trial goer needs to become an A ranked adventurer with a part of their strength sealed by a really special magic item.”

The trial apparently really was famous, as all the other adventurers seemed to know about it and filled us in with a few additional details. They told us that the magic item sealed away both a portion of one’s skills and stats.

No one present knew the exact details, but it seemed that one’s stats would drop by a minimum of 20 percent upon equipping the sealing item. It prevented one from using many of the Dimitris-Styled Martial Arts and also pretty much lowered the level of every single skill one happened to have.

Learning that promptly allowed us to understand why Colbert had suddenly gotten stronger the moment Barbra fell into chaos. He must’ve undone his seal in order to help us kill Rynford.

Erza himself had partied with someone familiar with the Dimitris-Style Martial Art in the past, and had the opportunity to witness its techniques from up close.

“Though, she wasn’t too high ranked, and couldn’t do anything too incredible at the time.”

Apparently, the thing that made the Dimitris-Style so amazing was its focus on Qi.

Qi was defined as the act of applying one’s energy either within or on the surface of one’s body in order to either use it as a weapon or simply reinforce oneself. It was similar to magic, which used the exact same energy source to create the phenomenon known as a spell. The distinction between the two basically lay in the manner in which the energy was directed. Like magic, Qi’s strengths and weaknesses were dependant on its users skills and natural disposition.

“Dimitris-Style Martial Arts take the concept of Qi to a whole new level. I don’t know too many details, but I think they’ve started to mix the concepts of Qi and Magic together. Mhm.”

“Qi and Magic at same time?”

“Yup yup. Dimitris-Style martial artists can send their Qi flying or deploy it as a shield.

I think they can also send their Qi into their opponents' bodies in order to destroy it from the inside out. I've heard that the style's more experienced users can do even more than just that, but I haven't really heard any details."

Apparently Dimitris-Style martial artists were able to do a lot more than just fire off the Kamehameha. Being able to totally wreck someone's body from inside out sounded really troublesome to deal with.

"I don't really think you need to worry about it though. At least not for the purposes of the tourney."

"Why?"

"Trial goers aren't supposed to be allowed to lift the seal unless it's to help people or defeat someone thought to be evil. You aren't supposed to release the seal out of self-interest."

Doing well in the tourney pretty much fell into the self-interest category, which meant we probably wouldn't have to worry about Colbert undoing his seal, which, to us, was fairly beneficial. It boosted the hell out of our chances of victory.

"Nn. Understood."

"Is there anything else you wanted to ask?"

We asked for details about Royce, Goldalfa, Amanda, Forrund and last but not least, Radyer.

"Radyer?"

"Good old Radyer? He's a strong one~ He doesn't have too much stamina due to his age, but he's really well experienced. You'll need to be able to deal with all sorts of magic if you want to beat him."

"What kinds?"

"As far as I know, he can use Greater Earth Magic, Greater Water Magic, and Storm Magic."

Radyr sounded hella tough. He was the only mages we heard of capable of using three different advanced magics. The closest to his level would be Royce, who was capable of using Greater Earth Magic, Moonlight Magic and Space/Time Magic.

We didn't really know much about Greater Earth Magic or Greater Water Magic, so we were going to have to proceed with utmost care.

"Did you want to know anything else, or is that all?"

"Nn. All for now."

"Mkay. Tell me if you ever want to know anything else. I'll tell you everything I can!"

"Nn."

"But that doesn't mean I'll go easy on you if we end up getting matched against each other, mkay? We'll have to fight it out fair and square. That'd be rude."

"Know already."

"Oh my, you seem really pumped and willing to go already. Fufufu."

Erza was a bit surprised by Fran's happy looking smile, but soon began matching it with his own while also returning her aura of belligerence.

Oh god damn it! Erza was a battle junkie too!?

Chapter 191

The Morning of the First Round

[Morning Fran, you get a good night's sleep?]

“Nn...”

Fran was still only half awake, but somehow managed to have absolutely no difficulty shoveling her breakfast down her throat regardless.

[Today's the day. The tourney's finally starting.]

“Nn...”

I'd been a bit worried as to whether or not Fran would actually be able to get a good night's rest, but it turned out that my concerns had been totally needless. To her, today was honestly just another day.

Our morning routine went just as usual. I washed her face, dried her hair with warm air, and gave it a good brushing.

[Today's your big day, so we'll have to make sure you look even cuter than usual.]

“Doesn't matter.”

[Don't be silly. Of course it's going to matter, you're practically going to be put on display.]

I finished styling her hair as I responded to her. Only after I finished that did her eyes finally snap open and fill with energy. She promptly began imitating my actions by brushing Urushi's. The wolf narrowed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation for a few moments before flipping onto his back and demanding more affection. The way he acted reminded me of the Golden Retriever one of my older neighbors had in the past. He seriously didn't give off even the slightest bit of the feral feel you'd normally expect from a wolf.

[We still a bit ahead of schedule. Feel like doing anything in particular, or?]

“Nn. Master, over here.”

[Huh? What’s up?]

“Nn.”

Fran grabbed a cloth and began polishing me off.

[We haven’t actually fought yet, so make sure you don’t tire yourself out doing that, alright?]

“Not problem.”

[But-]

“Because not just me.”

[What’s that supposed to mean?]

“Master also being put on display. Will have to make Master look cool.”

She continued polishing me as I brooded over whether I should thank her or tell her to stop. As far as I was concerned, Fran was going to be the star of the show, and I was just going to be an extra. I would’ve loved to keep contemplating so I could actually arrive at an answer, but ultimately stopped giving a shit not too long after she started because of how good it felt.

My loss of control led her to continue polishing me for a good 30 minutes, after which my blade became nice and sparkly.

[Are you sure that didn’t tire you out?]

“Still okay.”

[Alright, let’s head out then.]

“Nn!”



All contestants were to report to and gather in the Adventurer’s Guild. Block A was scheduled to be the first to fight, so its members had to get to there extra early.

Upon arrival, we were immediately led upstairs by one of the guild’s clerks. It seemed that the rooms on the second and third floors were being used as temporary waiting rooms. The fact that the rooms were private rooms as opposed to larger rooms with participants aggregated within them was one that I could only possibly conclude as beneficial. Hot blooded adventurers, like Fran, would probably start fights if left with all the other participants.

“Please wait here until we call for you. Your match will be the 6th, and each is timeboxed to 30 minutes, so I believe you won’t have to wait more than 2 hours. It depends on how long each match lasts, the shorter they are, the sooner you’ll be up.”

“Nn. Got it.”

“You’re free to observe the rest of the day’s matches once you’re done with your own, but you’re not allowed to leave the room until we call for you.”

The fact that matches were timeboxed meant you couldn’t really stall forever and just bore the crowd. It’d also prevent the tourney from getting thrown off schedule. However, it also meant that it was possible to run the timer. To that end, all combatants had to put on a magic item known as a Bracelet of Judgement prior to engaging in combat. The bracelet would allow one to determine a victor should the combatants eat up the whole 30 minutes they were allotted. The bracelet was capable of determining the contestants’ HP and MP values, as well as their relative consumption thereof. It would use the numbers it read to discern which of the two combatants would have emerged victorious had the match continued indefinitely.

“There’ll be a staff member just outside the door at all times, so please don’t be shy. Let us know if you need anything. “

The tournament’s participants were treated like VIPs and could order the staff to do all sorts of stuff. A few examples of the services provided were preparing light meals and acting as a proxy in order to do one’s shopping. It seemed convenient and all, but

didn't quite pertain to us. The stuff we had in our dimensional storages served to more or less satisfy all our needs.

As a result, Fran basically ended up just sitting down and taking it easy for a while.

We weren't bothered at all until about an hour passed, after which someone gave our door a knock.

"Excuse me."

"Nn."

"The fourth match has just begun. Your match will begin after the next one ends, so we would like to show you to a waiting room closer to the arena."

It seemed like the tourney was a good bit ahead of schedule, so we decided to ask the staff what was up. Apparently, what'd happened was that Goldalfa had lived up to his reputation and ended his opponent in what was literally an instant.

Both the other matches, however, ended right around the 30 minute mark, and apparently not because they ran out of time. Most combatants naturally disliked having things decided by their bracelets, and so, they'd often pull off their biggest moves and decide things right before the match was forced to end.

We moved to the venue by taking an underground passageway with one of its entrances in the guild's basement. It seemed like a pretty good measure to take, as having more popular participants waltz right through the streets would probably lead to the populace kicking up a fuss.

The room we were moved to was, not surprisingly, yet another private room, one several orders of magnitude more luxurious than the one we'd been staying in at the guild. The sofa they had in the room was gorgeous, and the bed was seemingly filled to the brim with down.

"The fifth match has now begun, so we may end up calling for you at any moment now. Please make sure you're ready for us when your turn comes around."

"Nn. Got it."

Fran dove straight into the super soft looking sofa and began enjoying it to its fullest.

After a moment's consideration, I realized that the match that was going on right now was the one between Kurusu and Radyer — which meant the explosions I'd been hearing from time to time were Radyer's spells. They were so loud that they even eclipsed the crowd's deafening cheers, which I actually had to strain my ears in order to catch.

Unlike me, who'd spent my time thinking about the match and whatnot, Fran had instead focused on relaxing. She'd leapt off the sofa, jumped onto the bed, and played on it with Urushi until an incredibly loud series of cheers resounded through the room.

[Sounds like the match's been decided.]

Given that realization, I strained my ears even further so I could hear the caster.

"And it's over! Despite popular speculation, Kurusu has taken the win!"

Wait, seriously? Kurusu won?

"Master, something wrong?"

I must've seemed really shocked, as Fran had immediately turned her head towards me in confusion.

[It's just that Kurusu's the one that ended up winning is all.]

"Kurusu?"

[Did you really forg- oh, whatever. Let's get ready to go. We'll be up soon.]

"Nn. Got it."

It didn't take long for a guide to show up at our door after Kurusu's and Radyer's matches came to an end. Said guide not only led us over to the arena, but also handed us a Bracelet of Judgement along the way. Surprisingly, the bracelet didn't actually take up an accessory slot, so we didn't have to swap any of our stuff out.

The venue used for the main tournament was both gigantic and incredibly well lit. I

called out to Fran on our way to the actual arena part because I was a bit worried as to whether or not she'd be nervous. Again, it turned out that my worries were completely needless, as Fran was in such a good mood that she'd actually been skipping along as we moved.

[Are you really not even the slightest bit nervous?]

“Nn!”

[Nice. Let's do this then.]

“Can't wait.”

[Make sure you stay in the shadows till after Fran gives the signal, alright Urushi?]

(Woof.)

The moment we entered the arena, we discovered that there were over ten times as many audience members present as there were during the secondary preliminary round.

They were so numerous that I found it incredibly difficult to discern individual comments anymore. There were so many different people cheering that the whole thing just kind of came off like a wave of sound.

“Mmph.”

The crowd's cheers roared at such high volume that Fran ended up grimacing and lowering her ears.

[You alright?]

“Nn... Alright used to it.”

Whew.

The sheer volume of the sound waves blasted at us made me understand that having sensitive hearing wasn't actually always a good thing. I didn't get how rabbitkin like Royce and basically anyone else with super sensitive hearing could actually manage

to cope.

“And our contestants have arrived! In one corner we have a fair maiden whose strength betrays her looks, the youngest C ranked adventurer to date. Ladies and gentlemen, please, extend your welcomes to Block A’s 11th contestant, Fran, the Magic Sword Girl!”

Fran slowly stepped up onto the stage with the caster’s announcement as her cue. On top of it stood her opponent; he’d already been awaiting her arrival.

“Mmph.”

Her expression immediately stiffened the moment she saw him.

“And in the other corner, we have an incredible man with a mercenary band at his back. Put your hands together for one of the younger generation’s most respected Blue Catkin: Blue Pride’s Leader and Block A’s 12th contestant, Zefmate, the Blue Strike!”

Fran’s opponent was not only none other than one of the Blue Catkin she detested, but also Blue Pride’s leader. Knowing that, she glared him, reached for me, and silently drew me from my sheath.

Chapter 192

Zefmate

Fran stared Zefmate down as the two stood across from each other at the arena's center.

"Hey there, heard you totally wrecked one of our guys."

"..."

"Could you maybe do without the glare?"

"Fmph..."

Though it was in part because we were about to have to fight him anyways, Fran didn't bother concealing her naked hostility. She narrowed her eyes and stared in his direction without bothering to say a word. He, however, responded not with bloodlust, but instead with a perplexed, bitter smile.

"I had Seiz punished."

"Nn?"

"I'm talking about the guy you beat during the second round of prelims."

"Because lost to Black Catkin?"

"Nah. It was because he was far too rude. He shouldn't have said what he did even if it was just for provocation's sake. In fact, let me apologize for him. Sorry."

"...!"

Zefmate caused Fran's eyes to widen in shock as he gave her a prim and proper bow alongside an apology. She wasn't the only one to feel the way she did, I also ended up surprised as all hell.

The reason for my surprise was a bit different from Fran's. I'd popped the Principle of Falsehood because I thought he was trying to bullshit her to butter her up, but it turned out that his words hadn't been laced with lies; he speaking from his heart.

"Seiz won't be one of our execs for much longer. I'm planning to demote him because I feel that we really shouldn't be thinking of or treating Black Catkin the way we do."

"Saying that even though Blue Catkin? Maybe not actually Blue Catkin? Something else?"

"Ahaha... I really am a Blue Catkin you know? Though, I guess I can see where you're coming from. I understand that you don't trust me, but I'd like to say that I don't approve of the slave trade, nor do I plan on looking down on you just because you're a Black Catkin."

[Wow. He actually isn't lying. Everything he's said so far is true.]

(Huh? Telling joke?)

[I'm being serious. He really means what he says. His apology was genuine.]

My words prompted Fran to once again glare at Zefmate, this time, as if probing him. He, however, didn't mind. He simply stood there exactly as he had been despite her looking at him the way she was — which made sense. There was no reason for him to react any differently given that he'd been speaking the truth.

"Can't be trusted!"

It was a result that led Fran to flare up in agitation, an emotion I couldn't really blame her for feeling. To her, Zefmate was basically the equivalent of a mafia boss, and good natured mafia bosses were a concept limited to the realm of fiction. There was simply no way for one to exist in the real world given the nature of their work. Hence, the result of the Blue Catkin communicating his intentions to Fran had caused her to be stricken with bewilderment, which wasn't exactly what you'd call the best emotion to be feeling going into a duel.

[Calm down. You don't really need to think too hard about what he's said. It doesn't change the fact that we're going to need to beat him in battle.]

“Nn. Will attack first, think later.”

General Information

Name: Zefmate

Age: 36

Race: Beastkin (Blue Cat Tribe/Blue Leopard)

Class: Blink Strike Swordsman

State: Normal

Status Level: 53/99

HP: 441

MP: 236

STR: 217

VIT: 200

AGI: 322

INT: 102

MGC: 129

DEX: 178

Skills

Espionage: Lv 3

Evasion: Lv 5

Crisis Detection: Lv 6

Bow Techniques: Lv 3

Bow Arts: Lv 4

Vigilance: Lv 4

Sword Techniques: Lv 8

Sword Arts: MAX

Divine Sword Arts: Lv 2

Command: Lv 6

Boost Morale: Lv 3

Kicking Techniques: Lv 4

Kicking Arts: Lv 5

Blink: MAX

Blink Step: Lv 3

Interrogation: Lv 4

Spear Techniques: Lv 2

Spear Arts: Lv 3

Twin Sword Arts: Lv 5

Elemental Blade: Lv 2
Climbing: Lv 7
Poison Resistance: Lv 3
Water Magic: Lv 3
Magic Resist: Lv 2
Vigour Manipulation
Lesser Agility Boost
Sense of Direction
Night Vision

Innate Skills

Awakening
Blink Strike Blade
Leopard's Paw

Titles

One Who Brings Victory

Equipment

Blue Dragon Fang Shortsword
Adamantite Alloy Longsword
Multi Headed Dragon's Body Armour
Leaping Dragon's Wing Mantle
Bracelet of Status Abnormality Resistance
Health Restoring Ring

"Ready... Begin!"

Both Fran and Zefmate immediately began to act the moment the battle began.

"Haah!"

"Cheiyaaah!"

Fran gave into her frustration and launched an attack backed only by brute force. It was a bit crude and lacking in finesse, but more than powerful enough to end the match if it happened to land.

Zefmate defended against the strike by crossing his blades and blocking. He then began attempting to wrap his two swords around me in order to disarm her. The technique was stellar, but his attempt ended in failure for the sole reason that he wasn't capable of matching Fran in terms of pure power.

The fight turned into a series of back and forths after the initial clash; both combatants continued to swing their blades at one another in an attempt to get a hit in. Though Zefmate was armed with two swords, and Fran only one, she gradually gained an edge on him and began taking control of the battle's momentum. The reason she was able to suppress him wasn't just because of her strength stat, but also because she was simply more skilled in the way of the sword.

Realizing that he was at a disadvantage, Zefmate leapt a whole ten meters back and disengaged, an effect likely brought about by that Leopard's Paw skill of his. The sheer amount of momentum it gave him was so great that it rendered Fran unable to catch up and immediately assault him as he landed.

"You sure are strong."

"Not too bad yourself?"

"Thanks. You being both a Black Catkin and as strong as you are really seems to prove my point. We Blue Catkin really have been wrong to look down on your kind."

"First time... Meeting not scum Blue Catkin..."

Fran's emotions had finally settled, she managed to grasp the truth and accept it for what it was. The gaze she threw in his direction was no longer one filled with anger or hatred, but instead driven by curiosity. She had taken an interest in him.

"Ahahaha... Yeah... You're right... We Blue Catkin really do have to stop acting the way we do."

Zefmate's laugh was dry, he seemed to be feeling both really depressed and somewhat awkward at the same time.

"Though I am still feeling apologetic, I won't be able to throw in the towel or let you have the match else risk harming my band's reputation. I'll still be winning this match of ours."

“Right back at you.”

Fran took a stance. She kept her guard up despite smiling and seeming a bit curious as to what Zefmate would do.

The amount of magical energy dwelling within him began to skyrocket.

“Fuh... Awakening...!”

His muscles began to bulge and expand at an incredible rate the moment he muttered the skill’s name. All visible parts of his skin were immediately covered by blue fur with black spots on it. His appearance warped into exactly what his race suggested — he became a blue leopard.

“We Blue Leopardkin are a species that specialize in enhancing our own bodies. You’d be best off not thinking of me as the same person you just exchanged blows with! Blink Strike Blade!”

“Gmph!”

Zefmate’s attack almost seemed to be paired with an instant transmission, as he almost seemed to vanish, only to reappear right next to us as he delivered his blow. The strike was so fast that Fran was unable to counter, and forced into only blocking it.

“To think you’d block even the first strike...! Haaaah!”

The Awakening skill had boosted his strength stat by more than 30 and his agility by almost an entire 200. If one were to judge him based solely on his speed, he’d likely be classified as an A ranked adventurer. His assault was fearsome, and really ingrained into my mind just how much more powerful Beastkin became upon evolution.

Blink Strike Blade seemed to be the type of skill that boosted one’s speed as one used it to attack. It, combined with Zefmate’s innate high speed, made him so fast that we actually couldn’t keep track of him with just our eyes. He seemed to be the most speed focused fighter we’d ever encountered to date.

He began using both Blink Step and Leopard’s Paw to move around at super high

speed in an attempt to throw us off while also attacking with Blink Strike Blade.

A ridiculous number of incredibly fast attacks came at us from every direction. If Zefmate were up against any weaker adventurer, he probably would've already completely torn his opponent to bits.

However, Fran wasn't what one could call a weaker adventurer. Thus, he hadn't even managed to get a single clean hit on her.

All that training we did had allowed Fran to grow much more accustomed to using her detection-based skills. Through their use, she was able to sense every single one of his moves — and that was all she needed. The fact that Fran could detect his attacks allowed her more than enough leeway to react to and defend against them.

“Impossible...!”

Fran's sheer ability had led Zefmate to panic. Though he stated he didn't look down on the Black Catkin race, he, as an evolved Beastkin, probably never even considered the possibility of losing to one in combat given that they weren't capable of evolving.

He must've simply thought that he, as an experienced veteran, would be able to trump Fran, a little girl, in all of stats, experience, skill quality, and skill quantity.

The Blue Leopardkin's attacks grew more frequent as he as he lost his cool. He stopped doing as many feints, and moved around much less between repeated offensives. His impatient attacks would've ended anyone that couldn't keep up him. But again, Fran could. As a result, his assault only grew duller. His strikes became monotone, repetitive, and predictable.

“Stone Wall”

“Gabahh!”

A low rising stone wall spawned in Zefmate's path as he closed in on Fran from behind.

The result mirrored exactly what would expect to see if a bike smashed into a guardrail at full speed; the impact of ramming into the wall caused Zefmate to go flying through the air.

“I was read like a book and baited!?”

“Inferno Burst”

Fran fired a spell towards what I presumed to be the now defenseless Blue Leopardkin — only to have me realize that I’d been underestimating the effects of his Leopard’s Paw, as Zefmate kicked the air and changed his trajectory to avoid the incoming flames. His actions had been so far out of the scope of my predictions that I even ended up unconsciously clicking my tongue.

[Tsk!]

I felt like the only reason I thought it was over was because I’d decided to leave everything to Fran. If I wasn’t effectively functioning as a spectator with the best tickets in the house, I probably wouldn’t have assumed that victory was assured even after Fran fired that supposedly final spell.

In other words, I wouldn’t have let my guard down.

I would’ve instead acted as Fran did.

“Burnia”

“When did you!?”

Fran had immediately started moving after firing off her attack. She used the flames she shot at Zefmate as cover, got around him, and approached him from the rear through the use of Fire Magic the moment he attempted to dodge the attack by using Leopard’s Paw.

“Haaah!”

“Gaaaarrggh!”

Zefmate was fast, but so was Fran. She was capable of moving just as quickly as he was, even after he’d awakened.

To him, it must’ve felt like Fran had instantly teleported behind him, like someone had matched his speed. And that was something he didn’t quite seem to be used to. He

wasn't capable of properly defending himself from her assault.

All he managed was to throw the sword in his left and thrust the one in his right in order to retaliate.

Both attacks, done purely out of desperation, proved ineffective. The sword he thrust at Fran only barely managed to scratch her cheek, whereas the one he threw ended up getting tossed inside her dimensional storage.

Fran slashed her opponent's legs as she pushed him out of bounds. She could've just sent him flying, but chose to rob him of his mobility as well, just in case he somehow managed to recover. Without his speed, Zefmate was sure to lose.

As a result, Zefmate had lost one of his legs, and with it, his sense of balance. He was unable to steady himself, and ended up falling outside the arena's boundaries.

"Its over! It's over!! I can't even tell what happened! Ladies and gentlemen, that, what we just saw was merely one of the tournament first rounds! Can you believe it!? Both combatants were moving so quickly I wasn't able to tell what either was doing!"

The fact that both Fran and Zefmate had dashed around as quickly as A rankers had caused the caster to start screaming in excitement.

"And our winner today is Fran, the Magic Sword Girl! Her victory has set a new record! She, as a 12 year old, has become the youngest contestant to ever win one of the tournament's rounds!"

Chapter 193

Seren

We weren't left to our own devices until after we were led back through the underground passageway we used to get to the arena. The guide informed that our next match was scheduled to take place two days from now and that we'd have to arrive just as early in the morning as we had for this one. We were also told that we were pretty much allowed to do whatever we wanted in the meantime.

[So, what now?]

(Will spectate.)

[Hey, that's a pretty good idea. We might make it in time for Colbert's match if we rush over.]

(Nn. Want to see other matches too.)

Fran mentioning that she wanted to spectate the other combatant's matches made me realize that we'd never actually had the chance to actually just sit down and watch other people fight.

I figured doing so would actually work to Fran's benefit. It'd allow her to see things from a whole new perspective, which, in turn, could probably allow her to learn a new trick or two.

[Alright, let's go.]

(Nn.)

Fran turned to leave the guild and head towards the arena, but was stopped by the guide before actually setting off.

"Were you intending on watching any of the remaining matches?"

“Nn. Planned to.”

“In that case, I recommend you wear some sort of disguise. The other spectators might make a fuss if they see you, especially since your match just ended and is still fresh in everyone’s minds.”

The clerk’s advice was spot on. Most of the spectators present for Fran’s fight were probably still at the arena, and there was fair chance they’d be able to recognize her on sight if she didn’t keep her face hidden. Some of the spectators might’ve lost a fair bit of money because of her, and getting involved with them sounded like a pretty bad idea if you asked me. The same applied to people that were *overly* interested in her. Actively avoiding pedophiles interested in her sounded like something that we’d probably benefit from doing.

“Then will put on disguise.”

“Please do.”

That said, we probably weren’t actually going to disguise ourselves too much. A quick change of attire seemed like it would probably be enough to do the job so long as we popped all our stealth based skills.

As such, all Fran did before heading towards the arena was throwing on a cloak. The tourney’s contestants were allowed to enter through the back door, so she did. The guard responsible for watching it ended up not only letting Fran in, but also giving her a salute of the highest order immediately after seeing her guild card.

The place was packed. It didn’t look like we were going to be able to find a place to sit.

[Looks like there’s one spot free over there.]

But fortunately, I did happen to spot a single empty seat.

“Nn.”

The seat wasn’t broken or anything, so we were pretty confused as to why it was empty, and remained so until just after Fran sat herself down.

“Oi, where the hell do you think you’re sittin’?”

“Nn?”

“Move brat, that seat’s taken.”

“That seat’s for our bro!”

There were a bunch of tough looking dudes sitting right next to us. They seemed to have been chasing off everyone that tried to take the seat.

A quick appraisal allowed me to understand that they were basically a few of Ulmutt’s local thugs. They tried to scare Fran away, but completely failed given that she was used to dealing with people much more intimidating than they were. The fact that they were annoying basically made it so we didn’t mind depriving them of their seats.

“Stun Bolt”

“Gyah!”

“Higgiiii!”

“Orpghh!”

Fran stunned all three thugs and threw them into the aisle.

“Urushi.”

“Woof.”

The people in our surroundings immediately stood up in surprise the moment they spotted Urushi, but Fran ignored them and loaded his back with two of the men while the wolf grabbed the third with his mouth.

“Dump somewhere.”

“Ruff.”

Fran saw Urushi off and then sat down, which, in turn, also caused the people around us to return to their seats. They didn’t bother talking to her though, seeing as how they

likely thought that doing so would bring trouble, which, to us, was pretty much the best possible outcome.

Nothing in particular happened thereafter. We watched the remaining matches in peace.

Unfortunately, we weren't able to gain too much from watching Colbert's or Amanda's matches, as both ended their opponents in an instant.

The match between Erza and Charlotte was actually quite worth mentioning. The crowd had really cheered for the latter as she danced, but she was unfortunately too weak to take down Erza.

She managed to start dancing in a rather bewitching manner, but her moves were cut short, as she ended up having to fight a desperate, one sided struggle in order to dodge Erza's mace. In the end, she ended up getting grabbed by the nape of her neck and chucked out of the ring.

Though we didn't learn much about Amanda or Colbert, we were still at least capable of learning a few neat ways to apply certain skills, ways we never would've thought up ourselves, even in our wildest dreams.

One of the more interesting combatants was a thief that buffed his opponent's sense of smell and then started throwing stink bombs and other foul smelling shit. The takeaway we got from that wasn't his technique itself, but rather the concept of buffing one's opponent and then turning that buffed stat into some sort of disadvantage.

We'd also learned just how one was actually supposed to use Lava Magic in combat. The mage we saw use it not only melted his opponent's weapons, but also superheated the ground for the sake of zone control. It was a magic that really allowed its user to take advantage of an opponent's weakness. Learning more about its applications really made me really consider leveling it up.

The sun had started to set by the time the day's matches had come to an end.

[Looks like it's about time for us to start heading home.]

"Nn..."

[Did you want to go somewhere instead, or?]

“Still have Zefmate’s sword.”

Right. I’d almost forgot that we were still holding onto Zefmate’s Blue Dragon Fang Shortsword. It was a pretty strong weapon, and honestly seemed to be on the more expensive side.

[We should probably give it back to him.]

“Nn.”

We didn’t exactly think well of Blue Pride, but Zefmate himself didn’t seem too bad. In fact, I’d honesty had to say I thought him to be a pretty good guy. Plus, giving it back to him probably wouldn’t take that much time, so it wasn’t like doing it would be detrimental.

[Hey Urushi, do you still remember Zefmate’s scent?]

“Woof!”

The operation was a go, and so, we had Urushi lead us over.

All in all, we spent about 20 minutes walking, after which we arrived at the city’s outskirts. There weren’t many houses around. The place was practically a large open field.

[Is this it?]

“Woof.”

Set up on that large field were a whole bunch of tents. It seemed Blue Pride had chosen to camp out instead of staying at an inn, as renting out rooms for all their members would be a pretty sizeable expense. Plus, camping out wasn’t really that tough on the mercenary band’s members anyways, seeing as how they were all fighters and whatnot.

I soon realized, however, that there was a bit of an issue. We weren’t really too sure how we were supposed to get to Zefmate. We couldn’t just waltz right through the

camp seeing as how his band's members would probably end up spotting us and kicking up a fuss.

Maybe I could create a doppelganger and deliver the sword that way?

My brooding was interrupted as one of Blue Pride's executives ended up exiting their tent and spotting us.

"Ah! It's you!"

The person that'd caught sight of us was one I recognized, the stuck up, 17-18 year old girl we met in front of Aurel's manor.

"Who?"

"I'm Seren, Blue Pride's second in command."

"Nn. Fran."

"Yeah, I know. You're the one that's completely played our band for fools. Why are you here?"

"Returning this."

"That's... my brother's sword! You thief!"

Seren immediately began giving off an aura of hostility.

Wait, did she just call Zefmate her brother? I guess that'd be why she gets treated as the band's second in command.

"Just how did a little Black Catkin girl like you manage to beat him in the first place!?"

"Nn? Strength."

"Stop lying! Black Catkin are famous for how weak they are! There's no way you could ever be stronger than my brother! You must've done something underhanded or cheated!"

“Didn’t.”

“There’s no way you didn’t! There’s no other way he could’ve possibly lost to a Black Catkin!”

Seren stamped her feet on the ground and threw a tantrum in a childlike manner unbecoming her age. She didn’t seem to share Zefmate’s views despite being his little sister.

“Ugh! Fine, whatever! If you want me to forgive you for being a cheater, go to the Adventurer’s Guild, tell them you cheated, and make them let my brother take your place!”

Fran’s eyes narrowed a bit because of how ungrateful Seren was acting.

“Refuse...”

The black catgirl’s mood was getting worse by the moment. She’d visited because she wanted to see Zefmate, not because she’d wanted to deal with this shit.

“Haaah!? What are you saying? I was offering to go out of my way to forgive you for cheating. You’re supposed to thank me, not give me attitude!”

I was starting to doubt whether or not Seren was really Zefmate’s younger sister. Their temperaments were... a little too different.

“...”

“Oh come on! This is why I can’t stand you stupid black catkin! I’m telling you to know your place!”

“...”

“Why are you looking at me like that? I’ll never forgive you if you refuse! Do you know what that’ll mean?”

“Don’t.”

Fran responded in an irritated tone; she was only barely managing to not to lash out

because Seren was Zefmate's sister. Her efforts were praiseworthy, but and she did manage to hold on, but it definitely wasn't something that could last too much longer. "Hmph. You Wimp Catkin only remain free because we Blue Catkin allow you to. If you refuse to forfeit, then we'll not only capture and enslave you, but every other Black Catkin out there!"

Ah, she said the word. RIP Fran's self control.

Seren had pushed Fran all the way to her boiling point; my wielder was as angry as she had been when Dias told her about Kiara. There was actually already no more helping Seren. Fran was going to kill her, and if worse came to worst, the entirety of Blue Pride would likely follow in her footsteps. I kinda felt bad for Zefmate, but it seemed to us that his followers were all your everyday average Blue Catkin. And if we were going to kill Seren, then wiping the rest of them out was probably for the better. They'd likely demand revenge if we didn't bother tying up all our loose ends.

"..."

Fran didn't say a thing. She simply drew me and attacked the girl in front of her eyes. The attack wasn't a well refined one. All Fran was doing was just lashing out in anger. Still, her strike contained more than enough power to reap the other girl's life.

But my blade never reached her.

Instead, it cleaved the flesh of another.

"Gafuuhhh..."

"Z-Zefmate!"

Zefmate had dashed between Fran and Seren so he could function as a meatshield and tank the hit; my blade smashed through his collarbone and dug all the way down into his lungs.

Fran had just tried killing his sister, but, despite that, Zefmate's glare fell not on her, but on person he'd been trying to protect.

"What... are you saying... Seren...?"

“Zefmate!? Are you okay!? What the hell did you just do to my brother!? I swear I’ll never forgive you, or your kind! I’ll wipe out every single last Bl-”

“Stop it...!”

“Kyah!”

The Blue Leopardkin slapped his little sister across the face shortly after she began cursing at Fran.

He didn’t bother treating his wound, and instead just immediately prostrated himself before the person that had just mortally wounded him in an attempt to apologize.

“I’m... sorry... my sister... didn’t mean it...”

“Don’t... care...”

Despite that, Fran’s response wasn’t a favourable one. She’d been pushed way past the limit of what she could bear. Her anger could no longer be abated by a mere apology.

“I swear... I won’t... ever let her... say something like that... ever again! I’ll... re-educate all... my troops... and exile the ones that won’t listen... no... I’ll even force them... into slavery...!”

Zefmate knew that something like mere banishment wouldn’t be enough to calm Fran down. It was too half-hearted. And so, he even offered to voluntarily sell his own blood related sister into slavery.

His battle with Fran had caused him to realize that she was way out of his league, and that she might end up slaughtering every single last one of Blue Pride’s members if he didn’t manage to influence her mood...

“Wait, what are you saying? She’s just a-”

“Shut... Up...”

Zefmate clobbered Seren, knocked her unconscious and caused her to collapse on the spot.

“I’m... really sorry...”

His injuries were serious. He was on the verge of death, but he completely ignored his own safety and only continued to apologize.

I sensed the people that lay within their tents begin to move.

[Well, Fran, what do you say? More people’ll start showing up if you don’t make up your mind fast.]

“I’m... sorry...”

“...”

[I’ll have your back regardless of what choice you make, so don’t hold back. Do whatever you want.]

“...”

Fran hesitated.

“Greater Heal.”

She couldn’t make up her mind immediately; it took her a few moments, but ended up deciding against completely obliterating every Blue Catkin present. She didn’t trust them. In fact, she hated them, but her impression of Zefmate was a good one and she didn’t think he deserved to die.

“Will be back another day. If no changes by then, will take action.”

“Thank you so much!”

Sensing the fury that lay within, Zefmate dropped to his knees and thanked Fran for her mercy.

Chapter 194

Golden Flames

[You sure you're okay with letting them off?]

"Didn't let off. Just gave time."

[Well, alright, so long as that's really what you wanted.]

Fran began walking around town immediately after leaving Blue Pride's campsite. The mood she was in was nothing short of terrible.

Zefmate had been a pretty good guy. Fran had felt that she might've been able to get along with him despite their races, and by meeting him, she'd learned that not all Blue Catkin were scumbags. Coming to know that had caused her to really want to become his friend. However, the circumstances had made Fran's desire extremely difficult to achieve. Zefmate had been an exception. None of his underlings shared his mentality, which in turn meant that the two could potentially end up at each other's throats.

There was a chance Fran would have to kill Zefmate in the near future.

To Fran, Seren's words had been nothing but offensive. They were so sick and twisted that they'd even gotten to *my* head, so I could only imagine the extent of the rage that dwelled within her. Neither of us could stand the attitude that most Blue Catkin had, and we probably would've murdered every single one present if Zefmate had been even a second later.

The things that'd been said to her continued plaguing her mind even now. They caused her darker emotions to swell and whirl around within. I hoped that she wouldn't encounter anyone that'd piss her off, as she'd probably end up losing control if she was to be encouraged to attack them.

Fortunately, there wasn't anyone stupid enough to do so given that her aura reflected her thoughts; she was emanating an air of pure danger, one that forced the people around us to look the other way.

She wandered around like that for about twenty minutes before suddenly turning heel right as she felt an incredible amount of magical energy burst out from behind her.

[I can sense the...]

“...Beast Lord?”

Its source was Blue Pride’s campsite, but it was so potent that we could measure the extent of its power from all the way back in town.

Sensing it had caused Fran to immediately begin dashing, not away from, but towards it.

The only person capable of giving off that much pressure was the Beast Lord. There wasn’t anyone else that possessed such a ridiculous amount of strength. Moreover, we didn’t even need to be present to tell that he wasn’t just training; his magic was laced with bloodlust.

Something had happened.

Fran had no idea what we’d be able to accomplish by rushing over to Blue Pride’s campground, but continued to pump her legs as hard as she could regardless. It was something that couldn’t be helped given the circumstances. All we knew was that something had happened, something that involved both Zefmate, who Fran had a good impression of, and the Beast Lord, who she feared.

[Hey Fran, are you sure this is a good idea? I’m pretty sure you’re heading straight for the Beast Lord.]

“Nn...!”

Getting to Blue Pride’s campground took less than 2 minutes at Fran’s full speed.

“Hah... Hah...!”

[I knew it. The Beast Lord really was here.]

The first thing we saw upon arriving was the Beast Lord. He calmly stood smack in the

middle of the camp, his body cloaked in golden flames. The second was Zefmate, collapsed on the ground, charred black, and clearly on the verge of death.

“This is what you get for defying me, idiot. Whatever, I’ve had enough of you. Just die already.”

The Beast Lord reached towards Zefmate with his flame covered right hand — an action that prompted Fran to react without the slightest bit of hesitation.

“Master, engaging!”

She went on the offense without so much as even waiting for me to reply; she drew me in her right, popped Deathgaze into her left, and shot towards the Beast Lord as would a bullet. The slashing attack that came out of the action was one as swift as the strike she’d used to assault Rynford; it was one that combined all her skills and knowledge, stealth-based skills included.

Rigdis, the Beast Lord, wasn’t all that proficiency when it came to detection. Rather, he was, but his wasn’t nearly as skilled at it as we’d expected the average S ranker to be. That, in turn, made it difficult for him to pick up on Fran’s sneak attack.

Ambushing the Beast Lord was a much better choice than calling out to him. Rigdis could always just ignore her and end Zefmate anyways, so attacking was, in fact, the most reliable option to go with if we wanted to save Zefmate’s life. Besides, yelling at him to stop would mean announcing to him Fran’s presence, which in turn meant losing the opportunity to get an initial first strike in. All that, of course, was only valid under the assumption that we would end up having to fight the Beast Lord anyways.

It was a choice only made possible by the fact that Fran had already resolved herself to fight him. For that reason, her blade held not even the slightest shred of hesitation.

She ended up going for his neck in hopes of ending him right off the bat; her goal was to disable him in a single strike. She didn’t care about incurring the wrath of an entire country, nor did she give half a flying fuck about the international uproar that attacking the him would lead to. The only thing that she bothered considering was what she needed to do to save Zefmate’s life.

We didn’t have to worry about holding back, the Beast Lord’s Sacrificial Bracelet would prevent us from murdering him regardless of what we did to him. Though we

were willing to engage the Beast Lord in combat, actually flat out killing him was something I wanted to avoid, as it'd put us a bit more than just neck deep in serious ass international shit. Attacking him was still a problem in and of itself, but, it was still a significant bit better than actually lopping his head off. You could say that we were only capable of going all out in our assault precisely because the Beast Lord happened to have a Sacrificial Bracelet on hand and equipped.

I was convinced that not even someone like the Beast Lord would be able to act if he was in a state terrible enough for him to actually need to pop a Sacrificial Bracelet, so I figured we'd be able to grab Zefmate and fall back before he managed to retaliate.

What Fran was doing was dangerous. That much, I understood. I knew that teleporting away and leaving Zefmate to die would've been in the interest of her safety.

But that wasn't something the person in question herself would be able to accept. If I really had been totally concerned about nothing but Fran's safety, I would've long advised her to take up a job less dangerous than adventuring. But I hadn't. That was in part because I wanted to go out and see the world with her, but wanting to adventure wasn't *really* why I'd chosen not to bother convincing her to change her mind. The other, more important reason was because I wanted to abide by her will. Fran wanted to be an adventurer, and that was that.

As Fran's guardian, it was naturally important for me to try to keep her as safe as possible. That was simply what being someone's guardian entailed.

But I wasn't *just* her guardian, I was also her sword. Thus, I needed to do utmost to fulfill her wishes, even if those wishes involved something as dangerous as jumping straight off a cliff.

As her sword, I'd already decided to follow right in her footsteps if she was to ever make that type of decision. And as her guardian, I'd decided to protect her to the best of my abilities regardless the of what the consequences of her choices were.

In other words, my role was support Fran in her decisions every step of way so long as it remained possible for me to do so.

The Black Catkin girl swung both her blades to form a cross the moment she closed in on the Beast Lord. His defenses were ridiculously high, but we figured we'd be able to pierce them so long as we focused everything we had on a single point. The two

swords that closed in on the Beast Lord's neck... failed to do anything to him at all.

Fran, both blades still drawn, stared at the uninjured Beast Lord with a look of bewilderment. She hadn't felt any resistance when slashing at him, so she didn't realize what'd happened until she looked down to my blade.

"Haah? Who the fuck are you?"

We'd successfully managed to stop the Beast Lord from slaying Zefmate, but Fran had fallen onto his radar as a result.

Fran lacked the composure to answer the Beast Lord's question. She instead stared at the two hilts in her hands.

Hilts.

Both her swords had lost their blades. In fact, Deathgaze was flat out done for, as all its magical energy had already drained out from within it. Even the Black Cat's Mantle, which happened to have gotten a bit singed, was acting abnormally. That is, it was repairing itself at a much slower rate than usual. You almost couldn't actually tell that it actually worked based on visuals alone.

The catgirl didn't understand what was going on.

But I did.

The reason Deathgaze and I had lost our blades was because we touched the golden flames that cloaked the Beast Lord's body. We both basically evaporated the moment we did. The flames didn't radiate any heat, but holy shit they were potent. The lack of consistency between the two facts was one only made possible because the golden conflagration was born of a skill.

"Master!"

"Hah? Master? You're this damned Blue Catkin's disciple?"

[Calm down Fran, I'm fine. Don't shout or throw a fuss. Just talk to me through telepathy, same as usual.]

(Whew...)

Fortunately, my blade was the only thing that ended up getting burnt off, so I was still fine and not yet irreparable. Unfortunately, the magical flames had robbed me of so much mana that I no longer contained any more than Deathgaze normally did.

[Man, this is looking pretty bad...]

Attacking the Beast Lord had caused me to come to understand that his flames functioned as an automated self-defense mechanism. They were *that* powerful even when just left in full auto mode.

I couldn't really see myself successfully fending them off in the case that he used them to attack.

"Oh come on kid. Answer me already. Don't just sit there with your mouth shut."

"Did... what to Zefmate?"

"Heh, responding to a question with another quest? You ain't got no manners, Black Catkin."

Being taunted by the Beast Lord caused Fran to grind her teeth in anger, but she ultimately ended up suppressing it and asking him a question regardless.

"Tried to kill Zefmate. Why...?"

"The fuck? Is something wrong with your ears? Did you actually not hear me? Ah, well, whatever. Fine, I'll talk. All I was doing was punishing a subordinate real quick."

The Beast Lord's word seemed to insinuate that Blue Pride worked under him, and that Zefmate had done something that'd gone against his orders. Was it because Zefmate was pro-black catkin? Did that mean that the Beast Lord was anti-black catkin?

"So I take it you're siding with him? Even though you're a Black Catkin?"

"...Nn."

“Huh, alright. Hey, you’ve got a pretty interesting sword right there. Whole thing just instantly fixed itself.”

I managed to fix my blade by using Instant Regeneration, but that didn’t mean I’d actually be of much use from an offensive standpoint given the Golden Flames’ effects. It looked like we were going to have to end up falling back on magic.

The Beast Lord’s element was fire, so we would probably need to counter him with either water or ice/snow. We couldn’t afford to be stingy with our skill points, I needed to invest them right away so we could make the most of our situation.

“Fran... Don’t...”

“Will save now, Zefmate.”

“Hahahah! What is this? A Black Catkin and a Blue Catkin acting all buddy buddy? Man, that’s so funny it actually makes me kinda pity you guys!”

“Shut... up...”

“Man, you’re still giving me that attitude? What a shame, I had some pretty high hopes for you. Alright girly, I’ll show you just how terrifying I, Rigdis Narasimha, the Beast Lord, can be. Lament the fact that you were stupid enough to oppose me!”

The golden flames that enveloped the Beast Lord’s body began to quiver and sway with a ferocious energy.

They were dangerous. It’d all be over if they so much as grazed us.

I got myself ready to teleport us out at a moment’s notice.

Fran and the Beast lord stared each other down, both ready to immediately attack the other.

But they were denied the chance to act.

“Your Majesty! What in God’s name are you doing?”

“Ugh... You again, Roche...?”

“How did this even happen? I only took my eyes off you for a second!”

A man I immediately recognized as the carriage’s coachman suddenly joined into the conversation and began chiding the Beast Lord in a reprimanding tone.

General Information

Name: Roche

Age: 37

Race: Beastkin (White Curse Weasel/White Weasel Tribe)

Class: Runeseeker

Status Level: 62/99

HP: 556

MP: 558

STR: 251

VIT: 302

AGI: 539

INT: 248

MGC: 306

DEX: 417

Skills

Sole Sense: Lv 4

Digging: Lv 6

Espionage: Lv 8

Wind Magic: Lv 4

Bow Techniques: Lv 9

Bow Arts: MAX

Divine Bow Arts: MAX

Coachman: Lv 7

Vigilance: Lv 8

Presence Detection: MAX

Presence Isolation: Lv 7

Flexibility: Lv 4

Blink: Lv 8

Muffle: Lv 5

Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 4

Life Magic: Lv 3

Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 5

Shortsword Techniques: Lv 4

Shortsword Arts: Lv 5

Perfume Creation: Lv 8

Leap: Lv 6

Climbing: Lv 5

Knowledge of Poisons: Lv 8

Poison Magic: Lv 5

Earth Magic: Lv 7

Subterranean Stealth and Mobility: Lv 5

Fire Magic: Lv 5

Magic Resistance: Lv 3

Magic Detection: Lv 7

Shadow Slip: Lv 7

Trap Disarming: Lv 6

Trap Detection: Lv 8

Trap Creation: Lv 4

Vigour Manipulation

Enhanced Sense of Smell

Enhanced Senses

Magic Manipulation

Enhanced Hearing

Innate skills

Awakening

Cursed Strike

Titles

Chimera Slayer

Dungeon Conqueror

Equipment

Hell Tree Bow

Dimensional Quiver

Black Shadow Beast's Leather Armour

Black Shadow Beast's Stealth Shoes

Magic Shadow Steel Armguards

Black Stealth Spider's Mantle
Ring of Dexterity
Bracelet of Storage

Roche was a sort of hunter, specifically the jack of all trades type that could use magic in tandem with more traditional scout-like skills.

"I really can't believe you... Why are you fighting a Black Catkin of all things? Have you completely forgotten why we came here in the first place?"

"Blame it on her, not me. She's the one that decided to side with Blue Pride."

"That doesn't mean you need to fight her, you muscle brain!"

"That's enough for now, Roche. Lord Rig, I've captured every member of Blue Pride that happened to have a hand in the slave trade and disposed of those that resisted."

Royce calmed Roche down while simultaneously reporting in.

Wait, did he just say he dealt with the everyone that had a hand in the slave trade?
Uh... what?

Chapter 195

The Beast Lord and the Blue Cat Tribe

Rigdis had already lost the will to fight. Likewise, Fran had done the same despite still being on guard. The reason for her sudden change in attitude was because Royce, one of the Beast Lord's guards, had started healing Zefmate.

"Explain situation?"

"Your Majesty, did you perhaps forget to inform her as to the current circumstances?"

Roche immediately began questioning the Beast Lord's actions, or rather, the likely lack thereof.

"Uhh..."

"Hah... Let me guess. You provoked her by acting in your usual cocky manner without actually telling her what had happened?"

"Hmph..."

"Do you have any injuries, young lady?"

"...None."

"That's good. So, exactly what kind of relationship do you have with Blue Pride?"

"Zefmate... Friends. Hate rest."

"Ah, I understand now. As for your, Your Majesty..."

"I know, I get it already. My bad, alright?"

"So? Why wanted to kill Zefmate?"

“Cause he tried to protect his buddies.”

“Hah... Allow me to explain.”

Roche gave us a detailed explanation of exactly what had happened.

Much to our surprise, Rigdis was against the enslavement of Black Catkin. In fact, he'd been going around freeing as many Black Catkin slaves as he happened across.

That precise action had caused an ideological rift to form between him and his father. The rift was so vast that he'd almost gotten disowned, so he ended up organising a coup d'état, murdering his father, and claiming the throne with his own two hands.

It was an act that he'd always suspected he might need to perform, and to that end, he'd joined the Adventurer's Guild, tempered his body, and secretly built up his connections. The only reason his coup had gone as smoothly as it did was because he'd managed to make every single last one of the Beast Kingdom's A or higher ranked adventurers into his subordinates.

Upon his ascension to the throne, Rigdis had promptly purged all of the spies and slave merchants formerly connected to the royal family. He'd then gone out on a mission in order to find all slave merchants outside the bounds of his country so he could free every single last Black Catkin that remained in captivity.

“But fought Zefmate? Why?”

If that really were the case, then him fighting Zefmate didn't really make sense. The two seemed like they'd get along from an ideological standpoint.

Or at least it did until one considered that Blue Pride was effectively Zefmate's family. He couldn't assent to allowing the Beast Lord to murder any of its members, even if they happened to betray his ideals. The Blue Leopardkin had ended up begging Rigdis to let Blue Pride's members keep their lives so he could rehabilitate them and fix their ways.

As the Beast Lord was rather short tempered, he ended up flaring up in anger and engaging Zefmate in combat upon hearing what he could only interpret as an excuse. That was when Fran had thrown herself into the equation.

Hearing the Beast Lord's side of things made me realize something. His manner of speech was crude, but he'd never actually said anything to belittle the Black Cat Tribe as a whole.

He had said, "So I take it you're siding with him? Even though you're a Black Catkin?" not because he wanted to insult Fran, but because he thought it was odd for a Black Catkin to want to side with the type of people that sold their kind into slavery.

The same pretty applied to when he'd said, "Hahahah! What is this? A Black Catkin and a Blue Catkin acting all buddy buddy? Man, that's so funny it actually makes me kinda pity you guys!" It came off like a sort of cheap provocation, but was actually far from it. He hadn't actually meant to insult the Black Cat tribe in any which way...

The Beast Lord's intentions were further evidenced by how subordinates had ended up capturing Blue Pride's members while we were attempting to engage him in combat.

"Fuck...!"

Zefmate groaned remorsefully.

"Hate me all you want. Just know that this is your own fault. I told all you Blue Catkin to stop with the slavery shit already, but your underlings ignored my orders and kept their black market dealings going anyways. And you didn't even notice. Seriously man, that one's all on you."

"I... know..."

A fair bit of Zefmate's regret stemmed precisely from the fact that he understood that he'd failed. He would've been able to avoid this whole mess had he just kept a tighter leash on his subordinates.

"How many... are still alive?"

"Approximately twenty, I believe."

"Only twenty..."

"Lord Rig, I've found the pair behind the whole incident."

Goldalfa entered the scene with a pair of Blue Catkin in tow. And when I said in tow, I meant they were literally in tow. He was dragging them along the ground with the very same piece of rope their hands were tied by.

“These two are both connected to the Slavery Syndicate your predecessor managed.”

“Sennek, Tord, were you two really responsible for manipulating everyone into doing all this?”

“Hmph! Why the hell should we care about Black Catkin? Why do we have to go through all this for just turning them into slaves? They can’t even evolve!”

“Yeah, I know right! All we were doing was making use out of an otherwise useless bunch!”

The two old Blue Catkin spouted off bold claim after bold claim.

Both were members of the many mercenary groups that’d come together to create Blue Pride. They’d functioned as something along the lines of consultants ever since the new organisation’s formation. They’d always been in positions of power within every band they’d ever been a part of, and thus, managed to use them in order to engage in the underground slave market.

The two had intentionally raised Zefmate to feel repulsed by the slave trade. They’d done so because it then made it easier for them to fool those that they wished to hide the true nature of their business from. His sister, on the other hand, had been brought up in the exact opposite manner. The two had effectively brainwashed her to have her current scumbag-like mindset.

The Blue Leopardkin likely would have been able to notice that something about his band of mercenaries was off had the two not constantly been one or two steps ahead of him — they’d trained him to not only be pure of heart, but also the type of person that wouldn’t doubt his comrades.

“But I guess we went a bit too far. We trained you so well you became unable to shake that stupid sense of justice of yours.”

Sennek attempted to mock Zefmate, but was hit right in his sore spot by Rigdis in

retaliation.

“Says a no-tail.”

“How dare you!”

[What’s a no-tail?]

(Long-tailed beastkin without tail.)

Longer tailed beastkin species put great importance on keeping one’s tail, as losing it typically implied cowardice. Thus, those that were supposed to have tails but didn’t were mocked as no-tails.

It normally wasn’t too much of an issue as one could recover a chopped off tail so long as it was immediately treated with either magic or potions, but, in cases where one’s injuries were more severe, priority was instead given to the limbs and whatnot. As a result, those with a lesser degree of access to healing would end up permanently losing their tails.

The old man known as Sennek appeared to be precisely someone that’d ended up in that kind of scenario. I’d thought that he’d just hidden his tail away in his pants, but apparently that simply wasn’t something that long tailed Beastkin with tails would actually do for reasons I failed to intuit.

Getting called out by the Beast Lord had, for some odd reason, caused Sennek to glare in Fran’s direction.

“I would still have my tail if not for you meddling Black Catkin...!”

“Nn?”

“Fuck! How dare you look down on me like that? And with a face that looks just like that annoying brat’s to boot!?”

“Brat?”

“Yeah, fuck her! Fuck Kiara for taking my god damned tail! And fuck you for looking just like her!”

“Know Kiara?”

“Of course I fucking do! Fuck her to hell!”

It seemed Sennek hated the Black Cat Tribe because Kiara had caused him to hold some sort of grudge. That, in turn, explained why he’d purposefully raised all the Blue Catkin around him to see Black Catkin the way they did.

“But you know what, it’s fine. I don’t care anymore, because that bitch got sent right off to the Beast Lord! Hah! Probably got turned into a slave and forced into a straight up living hell alright. Gyahahahah! Bitch got right what was coming to her!”

Fran immediately approached Sennek with me drawn and in hand.

[Wait, Fran! Hold on! Don’t kill him!]

Ending his life here and now seemed like an act that could potentially anger the Beast Lord and his bros. To them, Sennek still had value, as he likely knew about others that worked in his trade.

Convinced, Fran sheathed me and instead started pummeling both men with her fists. I realized that she’d went too far by the time their already old, twisted faces had ended up even more deformed and bent out of shape than they were before. I figured it’d be best for me to stop her, but the Beast Lord actually beat me to the punch.

“Hold on kid. Hey, you assholes. When you said Kiara, did you mean the old lady? You know, Grandma Kiara?”

Chapter 196

Kiara's After Story

"Hold on kid. Hey, you assholes. When you said Kiara, did you mean the old lady? You know, Grandma Kiara?"

The Beast Lord's inquiry caused Sennec to respond in a bit of a suspicious tone.

"Grandma Kiara?"

"She's taciturn, blunt, and proud, but a ridiculously skilled Black Catkin swordsman nonetheless. I know she's an old lady, but I can't remember how old. You happen to know off the top of your head, Royce?"

"Lord Rig, asking for our master's age is no different from tying yourself a noose."

"How 'bout you, Gold?"

"I'm pretty sure she's in her late 60's."

Goldalfa's response seemed to match with what we knew about Kiara. She was 15 years old 53 years ago, so she should currently be around 68.

"Based on what we've heard, I'd say the Kiara you guys are talking about is our master."

It seemed that, unless I was misunderstanding things, Kiara was actually the person that'd taught Beast Lord to fight. Fran had come to the same conclusion, so she ended up closing in on him in order to demand a clearer answer.

"Explain circumstances."

"You do know I'm the Beast Lord, right? How about 'bout you reword that a bit so it's more polite."

"Explain."

“Oh god damn it. Fine!”

The Beast Lord began fondly speaking of his memories shortly after one last expression of indignance.

Apparently, the first time Rigdis met Kiara was in the earlier days of his youth. Back then, she'd been a slave that served the imperial court. Her duties mostly focused around garbage disposal. At the time, he'd still been like any other young, mischievous Beastkin. That is, he thought the Black Catkin to be inferior, as per his father's wishes.

But that all came to change. His opinion of the race took a complete 180 degree turn not too long after he turned seven.

An incident occurred.

A summoner from a hostile nation managed to summon a magic beast in the royal palace. Back then, the Beast Kingdom had been at war with a neighbouring country, hence, most of the palace's more competent fighters had been sent to the battlefield. As the guards and soldiers responsible for the palace were relatively weak, the place was basically instantly overrun. Both Goldalfa, who'd just enlisted, and Royce, who'd only just started learning magic, had been dealt serious wounds.

The situation looked grim. None of the troops left within the palace's confines were capable of dealing with the Tyrant Saber Tiger that'd invaded it. To Rigdis, it had seemed like he was left no choice but to abandon the palace.

Or at least that was how he felt until *she* took action.

A Black Catkin slave ended up doing what none of the soldiers could and took down the Magic Beast. The Tyrant Saber Tiger itself wasn't a particularly strong one, it was still young, and yet to reach maturity, but it was still a C rank threat regardless.

Thus, he simply failed to process the fact that she'd easily slain it while armed with only a mop.

Bearing witness to the Black Catkin slave's technique had caused Rigdis to take interest in her. He snuck around and eventually managed to speak to her, only to find

that she was named Kiara, and that she had a blunt, straightforward personality. At the time, Rigdis hadn't had any friends, so he immediately grew attached to her.

The mix of his attachment to and admiration for her caused him to ask her to take him as her disciple, and so, she soon began teaching him the art of combat.

Her instruction was ridiculously tough, but proved more than effective as it caused Rigdis to become much stronger in a fairly short period of time. Noticing his rapid progress, both Goldalfa and Royce followed his example and became Kiara's disciples.

Since Kiara couldn't be seen instructing the group in public, they were forced to train in a secluded area away from the public's eyes. Specifically, the location they made their own was the garbage disposal site, a place that smelled so awful it automatically warded off any and all unwelcome visitors.

Rigdis had offered Kiara freedom, but she firmly refused it. His father had threatened her and told her that he would murder her tribesman should she escape.

The only reason Rigdis' father had let her live was because he'd suspected that she would come of use in the future.

Learning of her circumstances caused Rigdis to begin wondering why the Black Catkin were treated as they were. He started to investigate the mysteries surrounding their inability to evolve while also functioning to protect them.

Upon reaching adulthood, Rigdis was informed of a secret known only to the royal family's members, a piece of information that revealed why his predecessors regarded Black Catkin the way they did. With said secret, he also learned the reason why the Black Cat Tribe's members had become incapable of evolution.

"My old man told me everything because he wanted to open my eyes to his cause. Wanted to tell me to stop doing something as stupid as protecting Black Catkin."

But it didn't work. In fact, telling Rigdis the truth had the opposite effect his father had been hoping for, as, to him, the truth simply reinforced the idea that looking down upon the Black Cat Tribe was nothing short of a mistake.

Thus, Rigdis and his father ended up in conflict for many years, with the former eventually beating out the latter through a coup.

(Master?)

[Doesn't look like he's lying.]

Something this important obviously called for verification through the Principle of Falsehood. Using it allowed me to determine that the Beast Lord's words were almost entirely free of lies. The only times my lie detector ever went off was when he insulted Kiara or called her by a nickname that made it seem like he didn't respect her. Conversely, it didn't go off when he referred to her as his master. In other words, all the Principle of Falsehood had done was inform us that the Beast Lord was a veritable tsundere. ^[1]

"Kiara, doing what now?"

"Our master has gotten old, so she's effectively retired and just living within the castle. She spends most of her time sleeping, but will occasionally see to our soldiers if she feels up to the job."

Royce followed up the Beast Lord as he paused to take a breath.

"The royal palace has moved on from looking down on Black Catkin. None of the people that work and live within it are willing to insult them any longer."

"That's impossible! Black Catkin are an inferior race! Why else do you think we Blue Catkin have been pushing them around for all these years!?"

Sennek responded to the rabbitkin's words with a violent shout.

"The palace functions off a meritocratic system. We don't evaluate people based on their race, only their competence. Though, I admit we've been giving the Black Catkin a bit more leeway to make up for all that they've suffered."

The Beast Lord casually refuted Sennec's declaration.

"I assume you haven't heard about what's happened to the Blue Cat Tribe as of late."

According to Royce, most beastkin had recently started ostracizing the Blue Cat Tribe. There were two reasons that functioned as the driving force behind the

aforementioned movement. The first was that most other beastkin had a bit of a hard time trusting the Blue Cat Tribe knowing that they'd sold other Beastkin into slavery. While most other Beastkin did indeed look down on Black Catkin, they never went as far as treating them as slaves. The reason the Blue Catkin's treatment of the Black Catkin was so much harsher than all the other tribes' was because the Black Catkin used to have a higher social status than the Blue Catkin. This caused the Blue Catkin a lot of grief, and led to them going wild the moment their social positions were flipped.

The second reason was because the Blue Cat Tribe was regarded to be in decline. Their business dealings allowed the Blue Catkin to live luxurious lives, so few became true warriors, and even fewer trained themselves as hard as Zefmate had. As a result, the number of Blue Leopardkin had plummeted far beyond just a noticeable degree. This, in part, was the fault of the Beast Lord's ancestors. The Beast Lords of the past had ordered the Blue Catkin to become slave traders and persecuted all that dared disobey. Hence, most of today's Blue Catkin were the descendants of slave traders as opposed to the descendents of warriors.

In other words, most other Beastkin looked down on the Blue Cat Tribe both because they were weak and because they were repulsive from a psychological standpoint.

Fran didn't really care for the details nor Sennek's reply, so she ended up asking more about Kiara instead.

"Happy as long as Kiara is alive. Okay to tell other people?"

"Other people? Whaddya mean other people?"

"Dias and Aurel, Kiara's acquaintances. Worried about her since didn't know what happened to her after she was taken away by Beast Lord."

Hearing Fran's question caused the Beast Lord to nod as if he had come to a sudden understanding.

"Huh. I guess that's why they've been treating me with that hostile ass attitude. That explains that. Yeah, I don't mind at all, go right the hell ahead. In fact, how 'bout I tell them myself right after we're done here. Was planning to pay the both of them a few visits anyway."

"Nn. Do tell"

"I'm pretty sure you have lots to ask me, but I'm too busy for it right now. I'll answer all your questions after the tournament's over, so check in with me once it's done."

"Got it."

"Aight. I'll be looking forward to seeing how you do. Show me that you'll at least be capable of getting to the fourth round. There won't really be a point in me telling you anything unless you can."

The Beast Lord grinned at Fran in an intimidating manner, but this time, she didn't freak out. In fact, she responded to him by speaking in a motivated sounding tone.

"Planned to win from start."

"Hahahahahahah! You hear that, Gold? Royce?"

"It sure is nice seeing a young fighter all pumped up and motivated."

"Indeed, but I won't show her even the slightest shred of mercy should we meet in the ring."

"Bring it on."

"Buhahahaha! I like the way you talk smack, even to Gold and Royce. Fine then Fran, come visit me after you've won the tournament. I'll look forward to seeing you then."

The Beast Lord let loose a hearty laugh before entering the tent in which the remaining Blue Catkin were being kept.

This caused Fran's expression to change to one of worry, so Royce ended up ushering her off.

"What happens from this point onwards is the Beast Kingdom's business, so how about you head home for now?"

"What do to Zefmate?"

"Disobeying the Beast Lord is a crime, but I doubt Rig will do too much to harm

Zefmate. He's taken a liking to him, after all."

"...Got it."

The Beast Lord was the kind of guy that tended to be a bit rough around the edges, but the fact that he liked Zefmate meant that he probably wouldn't execute him or shove him in some sort of prison.

Royce's words seemed to have offered Fran enough to allow her to relax, so she bowed to him before finally turning around and leaving the area.

[Welp. Looks like we're going to have at least win ourselves three rounds if we want his approval.]

"Nn! Master. Will try hardest from now on."

[Sure thing.]

"Nn! Will win for sure!"

Chapter 197

Vs. Kurusu

Fran, Urushi, and I idled about in the waiting room as the second round drew closer. Our match was the third, and the first had already begun, so we were guaranteed to take the stage in less than hour.

A lot had happened yesterday, but none of it had functioned to discourage Fran. In fact, I'd say that the events that'd transpired ended up motivating her more than anything else; she now was practically dead set on at least making it past the tourney's third round.

The fact that the Beast Lord was going around crushing Blue Cat slave traders made her feel a sense of satisfaction, so she'd recently started acting in a much less aggressive manner than she otherwise normally would have. That said, she would still do the usual and beat up any that attempted harassing her. Though she didn't seem to realize it herself, it seemed that hitting them wasn't enough to dispose of all the stress they brought, and as a result, she'd been on edge for the past day and a bit. To be honest, her much more frequent interactions with Blue Catkin weren't the only reason she was so much sharper than usual. Participating in the tourney, in and of itself, had also put her in a more belligerent mood.

Given that our match was coming up soon, Fran decided to warm herself up. Namely, she swung me a bit and practiced dodging by having Urushi jump at her.

[Our turn'll be coming up soon, so don't push yourselves too hard just yet, alright?]

"Nn."

"Woof."

Both Fran and Urushi continued to accelerate despite voicing their agreements. The pair had already gotten so fast that their actions had become indiscernible to the average person. That, however, wasn't enough to make me stop them, as to Fran, her current actions were pretty much the equivalent of a walk in the park.

A clerk came knocking not too long after the two started warming up. I was honestly surprised with how quickly it came; we'd only been waiting for about 30 minutes.

"Excuse me, Miss Fran? The second round is over. It'll soon be your turn, so please get ready."

Asking the clerk allowed us to confirm that Goldalfa had once again ended his opponent in an instant.

Yeah, beating him definitely looked like it wasn't going to be easy.

"Please follow me."

[Oh yeah, Fran, don't forget to say something like "nice to see you again," when we run into Kurusu. We have met him already after all.]

"Nn?"

[Make sure you do, alright? Don't pretend you forgot who he is, okay?]

"No problem."

Hmm... I couldn't help but feel a bit worried. Fran seemed to have totally forgotten that Kurusu existed, but he was still technically a C ranker and therefore not exactly what you could call a small fry.

The impression I had of him was that he was the leader type as opposed to the type that was actually all that skilled in single combat. But that impression didn't really hold. He seemed a bit different this time around. The man we found upon climbing our way onto the stage had a sort of fierce air to him.

"You're not someone I ever expected to see here."

"Nn."

[Huh, is that really supposed to be Kurusu? He seems a lot more... wild than he did last time we saw him.]

General Information

Name: Kurusu Ryuuzel

Age: 28

Race: Human

Class: Mad Swordsman

State: Normal

Status Level: 37

HP: 256

MP: 175

STR: 183

VIT: 102

AGI: 219

INT: 83

MGC: 98

DEX: 125

Skills

Malice Detection: Lv 3

Espionage: Lv 4

Evasion: Lv 6

Court Etiquette: Lv 3

Madness: Lv 4

Presence Detection: Lv 6

Sword Techniques: Lv 6

Sword Arts: Lv 8

Art of Self Defense: Lv 4

Command: Lv 2

Blink: Lv 8

Cold Resistance: Lv 4

Poison Resistance: Lv 7

Trap Detection: Lv 2

Dulled Sense of Pain

Vigour Manipulation

Passive HP Regeneration

Last Stand

Titles

Giant Killer

Righteous

One That Has Overcome Death

Equipment

Raging Sabertiger's Longsword

Mithril Alloy Body Armour

Hundred Foot Spider's Mantle

Sacrificial Bracelet

Ring of Evasion

It looked like he'd switched from being a Blink Swordsman to being a Mad Swordsman. As a result, he'd lost a fair bit of vitality and dexterity in exchange for a boost in his strength and agility. In other words, his role seemed to have transitioned into that of an all out attacker.

Seeing his face had finally caused Fran to recognize him, but she ended up a bit confused because of the disparity between how he was now and how he was before.

"What happened?"

"Fufufu. That's a mean question to ask."

"Different feel."

"Seeing the way you and Amanda fought let me to contemplate a few things and alter my own style a bit. I just so happened to get a bit too immersed in retraining myself is all."

In other words, seeing Fran and Amanda go at each other had caused him to go into shock and question his own abilities. Thus, he ended up trying a few things and adopting whatever he thought was best.

Personally, I think he probably changed a bit *too* much.

"This is perfect. I knew going into this that I'd never be able to catch up to you, but fighting you is still exactly what I needed to see just how far I've come!"

Kurusu drew his blade, a longsword carved from the fang of a Tyrant Sabertiger. It was something we had to be careful of, as it had the Vibration Fang skill.

“You’ve even ended up matching my rank. I guess that means I’ll have to make sure I don’t disgrace myself.”

“Also won’t lose.”

Fran drew me and took a stance.

The caster seemed to take that as a signal of sorts, and immediately declared that the match had begun.

“Here I go! Madness, activate!”

Kurusu immediately threw his defenses out the window and cast a buff that caused him to focus purely on offense; he chose to try hitting her before she hit him. It wasn’t a bad choice, as he knew that Fran’s offenses would’ve overwhelmed his defenses either way.

“Down Break!”

The Mad Swordsman’s training had evidently paid off. He’d raised his stats and discovered for himself a new way of engaging in combat.

But he wasn’t the only one to have grown stronger.

Fran had done the same, and unfortunately for Kurusu, the changes in her stats had been much more dramatic than the changes in his.

The gap between him and her was even wider than it’d been back in Alessa.

“Haaah!”

“Slow.”

“Gah!”

Fran easily sidestepped Kurusu's downwards swing before countering by directing her blade towards his sword arm.

Realizing her intentions, Kurusu forced his left arm between him and me in order to trade it in and save his right.

"Forfeit?"

"Fufu. Not yet. My left may be done for, but I've still got my right!"

"Thought so."

"Kuh!"

Fran took the initiative and went on the offensive. Her foe was able to avoid her first two attacks, but that was it. The loss of a hand had caused him to lose his ability to balance, which, in turn, caused her third strike to embed itself within his body. Naturally, it didn't just end there. She aimed me at his right hand and attempted to strike it once more in order to force him to surrender.

But he still didn't give up.

"Last Stand!"

Kurusu's body began glowing the moment he shouted the skill's name.

I sensed a sudden influx of mana, so I decided to appraise him. Doing so allowed me to figure out that he'd lost most of his HP, but gained a massive boost to all his stats. He'd even gotten the Nullified Sense of Pain skill to boot.

The skill he'd just used was one that could only be used when on the verge of death.

"Gaaaahhh!"

"Mmph!"

The Mad Swordsman didn't attempt to avoid Fran's strike despite the boost to his agility. In fact, he willingly facetanked it while roaring and throwing out a counter.

Only then did I finally come to understand his strategy. It was perfectly fine for him to take a fatal hit given that he had a Sacrificial Bracelet. His Nullified Sense of Pain allowed him to take advantage of the instant he tanked Fran's attack. Specifically, it allowed him to retaliate regardless of all other factors.

It was a strategy that didn't sound too bad given how the tournament worked. It didn't matter how injured he got. He'd end up getting healed by the tourney's staff so long as he didn't die. Pushing himself to the very edge of death would make it possible for him to defeat foes whose stats were higher than his own.

"Gah!"

"Still slow."

But it didn't work.

Fran warded off the blade he thrust at her by smacking its side with her palm and throwing it off course, an action only made possible by the fact that she could track his sword with pinpoint accuracy.

And then she kicked him, right in the cut she'd given him earlier. It was an attack that he simply couldn't possibly have dodged. He was too far off balance, not that he could actually keep up with her to begin with.

All the air was sucked out of his lungs; he wasn't even so much as able to scream as he was sent rolling off the stage. He stayed on the floor even after getting sent out of the arena; it looked like he'd lost consciousness.

"And that's game! The winner is Fran, the Magic Sword Girl! She's managed to triumph through not only the first, but also the second round despite all the adverse rumours and speculation!"

Apparently the crowd had thought that Kurusu was more likely to win, which, to be honest, wasn't all that unexpected given that he'd been a C ranker for much longer than we had.

"Kurusu had attempted to apply the same suicidal strategy he'd used in the first round, but this time, his sword fell short! What a shame! It looked so close too!"

Chapter 198

Vs. Colbert

Two days passed in the blink of an eye. Fran and I found ourselves staring the third round in the face before we knew it.

We were up against Colbert, the exact person that we'd been expecting to have to fight. We'd known that our confrontation with him was coming for a long while already, but I ended up feeling a bit nervous regardless. It wasn't something I could really help.

Fran, on the other hand, was calm and serene, seemingly in part because she was currently engaging in meditation, specifically zen meditation. I'd been the one that taught her the concept, but honestly, I barely knew anything about it myself. My knowledge of Zazen pretty much did nothing but scratch the surface. I was only able to tell her the concept and the fact that it involved closing her eyes and concentrating. She really seemed to like the idea, so she'd more or less figured the rest out all on her own.

Her current session had spanned just over ten minutes. Urushi hadn't wanted to disturb her, so he ended up laying down beside her instead of attempting to warm up as he had while waiting for the tourney's second round.

It seemed that the opponent Goldalfa faced in the third round was much stronger than the ones he'd faced in the first two, as he hadn't actually done his usual thing and won the round in a matter of moments. We would've had to leave the room basically immediately after entering it if he had. We instead had to wait for about another five minutes before finally begin called for.

"Good morning. It's time for your match. Please follow me, I'll lead you to the arena."

Fran's eyes shot open the moment the clerk said her name.

"Go time."

Her lips curved into a smile as she got back onto her feet.

She didn't seem to be even the slightest bit nervous, nor did it seem like she'd be off because she was way too hyped up.

Today, Fran was in perfect condition.

(Master, will go all out this time.)

[Want me to start helping right off the bat?]

(Nn. Will try to go for quick win.)

Like most battle maniacs, Fran normally tended to prefer a bit of a more wait-and-see type attitude, but today, she decided that it would be best to go full throttle right off the bat. Her decision to treat this battle differently from all the ones that preceded it was one I agreed with.

That tendency to allow one's opponent to go all out wasn't what I'd call wise. We couldn't really afford cutting our opponent any slack given that we had to live up to the Beast Lord's expectations if we wanted him to actually bother speaking to us, especially because said opponent happened to be Colbert.

Another factor that played into her shift in attitude was that she no longer had to worry about antagonizing the Beast Lord. The possibility of him attacking us had basically been shrunk all the way down to zero, so we wouldn't need to pull our punches nor keep a few trump cards in reserve just because he was watching.

Fran passed through the usual dark corridor and entered the ring, only to be greeted with cheers and shouts even louder and more passionate than the ones she'd heard just two days prior.

"And there she is! Our first contestant today is the girl that's overwhelmed both the opponents she's fought so far despite all expectations, a Black Catkin, Fran! I can't wait to see just how far her strength can take her!"

Colbert had yet to arrive, but the crowd had started to roar regardless.

The screams directed towards Fran could be split into three main groups. The first, were the angry folk that'd bet on her opponents in the first and or second round. The

next type cheered in a much higher pitch, and seemed, in general, to have taken a liking to Fran because of how cute she was. The final group was a bit different from both of the first two and mainly consisted of adventurers.

At first, I was a bit surprised that there were so many of them rooting for us, but I soon realized that they were mostly members of Erza's faction. I kind of suspected that he'd probably ordered them to cheer for us, as the extent of their motivation almost seemed a bit unnatural. I apparently wasn't the only one to feel that way, as many of the other guests also seemed a bit shocked.

Seeing the crowd caused Fran to recoil a bit in embarrassment, but she still seemed kinda happy they were cheering for her regardless. The audience as a whole immediately reacted to her bashful attitude by getting even rowdier. It seemed she was really popular.

Even so, the noise was soon overwhelmed by a series of hollars that matched the one that'd first greeted her when she entered the ring.

"And there's her opponent! This round's second contestant is no less popular than the first. Ladies and gentlemen, I present you a man known for using nothing but his fists to defeat even the most powerful of foes, B ranked adventurer, Iron Claw Colbert!"

I appraised Colbert and confirmed that his stats were basically the same as what they'd been back when we met him in Barbra... which meant basically nothing given that the stats that showed weren't actually his real stats.

"Hello Fran. I can't say I was expecting to see anyone else."

"Nn. Colbert too."

"Hahahah. As a B ranker, I won't lose that easily, especially not to anyone weaker than me."

"Including me?"

"Well, I don't think you're any weaker than I am... but I will have to win anyway if I want to keep face."

"Can't lose."

“I feel the same.”

Sparks almost seemed to fly as the two narrowed their eyes and looked at each other. The fighting spirit that emanating off their bodies expanded through the entire venue and shrouded it with an intense pressure powerful enough to silence the crowd. The spectators instead gulped as they observed the tense atmosphere that’d broke out between the two warriors.

“Let the third round’s second match... begin!”

“Now come.”

Colbert was doing what we expected. He took on the typical wait-and-see type approach, not because he was going easy on us, but because he was confident he could handle anything we threw at him.

We, on the other hand, had already turned the dial to 11.

[Stone Wall]

[Fire Wall]

[Wind Wall]

The three spells I casted worked to form a sort of tunnel around Fran and Colbert.

He immediately tried smashing the its’ ceiling in order to escape, but he was too late. The fact that he allowed us to take the initiative meant we were already a full step in front of him.

“Inferno Burst”

[Inferno Burst]

Both Fran and I immediately cast a flame-based spell and flooded the tunnel with fire before Colbert could escape it. The attack’s heat was so intense that it caused the stone we created to start melting, but it didn’t collapse right away. The flame and wind walls supported it and managed to keep it standing for a few seconds by regulating its temperature.

In other words, the other two walls attempted to feed heat back into the interior as

opposed to allowing it to leak outside, which in turn meant that it ended up not only trapping Colbert, but also providing a bit of a boost to our Inferno Bursts’.

We knew our attack was a fairly sound one, but we didn’t let up. We trusted that Colbert was too strong to fall to just that, and so, we threw in a follow up.

“Wind Bullet!”

[Stun Bullet]

All the smoke and flames made it so we couldn’t actually see him, but that didn’t matter. We simply shot where we felt his presence in order to pin him down and keep him from moving.

Only then did we finally throw in an attack that was actually meant to inflict some more serious harm.

“Haaaaah!”

[Let’s do this!]

The next attack was one I hadn’t had a chance to use in quite a while, my ever so reliable Telekinetic Catapult. The arena was a bit too small for me to reach my full speed, but I still flew at him incredibly quickly nonetheless.

I was confident that not even Colbert would be able to avoid the strike without sustaining a significant injury.

“Nragh!”

[Woah!]

But I was wrong.

A mana-covered fist approached from my side right before I managed to pierce him, one that contained so much force that it seemed like it would send me flying into orbit.

His counter made me realize that he was much more dangerous than I’d been expecting. He was skilled enough to easily knock aside the attack I planned to finish him off with, and basically hadn’t taken any damage from our prior bombardment.

The only thing that'd even gotten the slightest bit burnt was his clothing.

We had to defeat him before he actually got serious.

I hit the brakes as hard as I could by using telekinesis and wind magic while also making myself as spiky as a porcupine and cloaking myself in lightning.

"What!?"

Colbert's voice rose in shock. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever envisioned that the sword he readied himself to hit would stop in place and transform.

His defenses were ridiculous. My needles, which were capable of tearing metal armour to bits, failed to pierce his skin. However, he didn't remain unharmed. He was assaulted by the lightning I'd wrapped around myself nonetheless.

"Gugagagagargghh!"

"Stun Bolt!"

Fran followed up my attack by throwing another lightning-based spell at him.

The two potent electrical energies shot throughout his body and caused sparks to erupt all over it.

"Finishing blow! Gale Hazard!"

Fran's finisher, a blast of wind magic, evidenced that she wanted to end the match without having to engage in melee combat. She didn't want him pulling off what Kurusu tried, and turning everything around at the last second.

Colbert was sent flying over 20 meters. It looked like he'd ring out and crash into the audience.

Fran stayed vigilant, she carefully watched as he flew so she could prevent him from recovering with magic should he try it.

But it wasn't enough.

"Mmph."

[Did he just use a Feather of Teleportation?]

Colbert suddenly disappeared. I immediately recognized that he'd teleported, but couldn't figure out where he went. I wasn't able to find him by scanning the stage.

"Above."

[He took to the sky!?!]

Fran immediately caught onto the fact that Colbert had chosen to teleport way above the arena. His decision was a solid one that made good use of the item he'd employed. Gaining airtime allowed him to not only avoid losing but also respace himself. The only thing he had to really worry about was how he was going to land.

However, it wasn't without its demerits. Hanging around in the air basically made him a sitting duck given that Fran had an abundant amount of long ranged attacks.

"Nn!"

She took aim and bombarded him with a whole slew of spells. Specifically, she'd chosen wind-based ones that prioritized max range over power.

I matched her attacks by throwing out several flame-based spells. The wind-based ones functioned as visual clutter and prevented them from being seen, which worked quite well, as they were powerful enough to instantly end the match.

But again, I was hoping for too much.

Colbert tore every single last one of our spells apart with his fists the moment before they hit him.

He then changed his direction midair with a burst of Qi and oriented himself so he was facing Fran.

"Hraaaaaghhhh!"

An incredible amount of magical energy suddenly began emanating from his body. The martial artist swung his fists through the air. Each movement, each punch, was

accompanied by a blast of Qi that headed straight for Fran.

The individual Qi based projectiles were rather weak, but they were threatening nonetheless due to their sheer quantity; Fran was forced to respond by blasting them out of the sky with a few techniques of her own.

Still, they'd accomplished their job. They bought Colbert enough time to land.

He took a guarded stance with an evident lack of openings the moment his feet touched the ground before turning towards Fran and narrowing his eyes.

Likewise, she raised me and matched his glare with her own.

"Fuh. You sure are impatient, trying to end the match right away like that."

"Was just taking advantage of opening."

Chapter 199

Vs. Colbert 2

“Fuh. You sure are impatient, trying to end the match right away like that.”

“Was just taking advantage of opening.”

“Haha. I never expected you to be this good a Magic Warrior. I’m impressed. Have you been holding back this whole time?”

“Back at you. Suddenly more magical energy?”

Fran wasn’t kidding. The amount of magical energy enveloping Colbert’s body had undergone a drastic increase.

General Information

Name: Colbert

Age: 38

Species: Human

Class: Iron Fist Fighter

State: Normal

Status Level: 41/99

HP: 381/508

MP: 330/452

STR: 299

VIT: 204

AGI: 253

INT: 141

MGC: 201

DEX: 239

Skills

Barehanded Combat Techniques: Lv 6

Barehanded Combat Arts: Lv 6
Crisis Detection: Lv 3
Divine Fist Arts: Lv 2
Fist Techniques: Lv 9
Fist Arts: MAX
Combat Qigong: Lv 4
Herculean Strength: Lv 8
Blink: Lv 9
Swimming: Lv 4
Greater Water Resistance: Lv 2
Throwing: Lv 4
Life Magic: Lv 3
Dimitris Style Martial Techniques: Lv 8
Dimitris Style Martial Arts: Lv 8
Physical Barrier: Lv 4
Magic Emission: Lv 5
Drowsiness Resistance: Lv 3
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 4
Cooking: Lv 2
Hawk's Eyes
Beast Killer
Thought Division
Lesser Strength Boost
Vigour Manipulation

Inherent Skills

Iron Fist

It looked like he'd undone his seal. He'd suddenly gained several skills, namely the Dimitris Style ones, Physical Barrier, Magic Emission, and Thought Division. Both Herculean Strength and Blink had also had their levels boosted a bit. That, of course, wasn't all; he gained a pretty massive boost to his stats. I recalled they used to be.

HP: 428
MP: 202
STR: 249
VIT: 154

AGI: 203
INT: 91
MGC: 101
DEX: 189

In other words, all his stats had risen by 50, save for magic, which had gained a whole 100 points. That, combined with his newly unsealed Dimitris Style skills, made it so we'd practically be fighting a whole different person from here on out.

[Be careful. He's undone his seal.]

"Undid seal?"

"...So you noticed?"

Colbert's expression seemed to waver in unease as he signed, an action that demonstrated that he hadn't actually been too willing to undo his seal. I decided to try probing him, given that his current state was clearly the result of self interest.

[Hey Fran, repeat after me for a bit, alright?]

"Nn."

That is, I decided to try attacking him mentally instead of physically, as it seemed like we'd be able to profit from it.

"Won't be excommunicated for unsealing for self-interest?"

"That... does happen from time to time, yes."

"Colbert, won't be excommunicated?"

"I might be."

"Then why undo seal?"

Fran's words caused Colbert to look down and make a bit of a troubled face before returning his gaze to her and shaking his head.

"You're right. Undoing my seal like this might get me excommunicated, but, I don't care. That's not what matters most to me right now!"

Colbert raised his voice as he once again took a stance.

"Then what matters most?"

"The answer to that question is a simple one. What matters most to me right now is upholding the Dimitris Style's pride."

His declaration came with a really cool sounding line.

"Getting serious and undoing seal against opponent with child's appearance for pride?"

"Ugh..."

Heh. Looked like we hit the sucker in a sore spot.

"Pride?"

"Sorry... I was just saying it that way because I was trying to make myself sound cool."

"Expected."

"Ugh... Yeah, you're right. I was trying to make it sound much better than it really was."

Uhh... shit. I realized that we'd pushed him a bit too far, as our words had ultimately led to an effect opposite that of what I'd been hoping for.

"Sorry. You're right. I didn't undo my seal out of something as propossessing as pride. I did it because I wanted to, because I, as a practitioner of the Dimitris Style, wouldn't be able to forgive myself for losing this easily to a C ranker. That just isn't something I can allow to happen. I have always looked up to the Dimitris Style, and known it to be the world's most powerful."

The magical energy Colbert emitted began wrapping its way around his body. It only took a matter of moments for it to grow so dense that it'd effectively become a suit of

armour.

“That is why I cannot allow myself to lose. I will not let myself be the reason people look down on the Dimitris Style! I would much rather be excommunicated than put the style to shame!”

That was just how much the Dimitris Style meant to Colbert.

But despite his passionate shouts, Fran managed to retain her calm. Likewise, I’d done the same. This, him going all out, was within the realm of my expectations.

“Gale Hazard!”

Fran fired off an AOE projectile at him in order to keep him as pinned as possible as she rushed at him. His stats had risen, but his Divine Fist Arts had remained unchanged; he still possessed the exact same amount of skill with his hands. Hence, I suspected that Fran would retain the upper hand in terms of technique.

Or at least that’s how things were if I didn’t factor the Dimitris Style in. I was on guard for what would happen, but apparently not nearly as on guard as I should’ve been.

“Dimitris Style Martial Art — Asura!”

“Kuaahh!”

Colbert allowed Fran to slash at him, but immediately followed with a counter and sent her flying back. He then kicked off the ground in attempt to chase her down and follow up his attack with another before she could regain her balance.

“Oraaah!”

“Kuh!”

His strategy, taking a hit and then countering, was similar to Kurusu’s, but he was much more skilled, and hence, his application of the tactic had been much more effective.

The first major point of deviation was the fact that we hadn’t even been able to actually pierce his defenses; Colbert managed to remain unharmed despite the fact that Fran

had attacked him with my element-cloaked blade. His martial art allowed him to condense magical energy and use it in the same manner as he would his arms. These four newly created energy-based appendages stayed close to his body and, in doing so, almost made it him truly resemble the six armed God the technique was named after.

It was precisely this technique that allowed him to avoid taking any of the damage we would've otherwise inflicted. It seemed to have both boosted his reaction speed and the range of his field of vision, as he'd used two of his magical arms to catch me mid swing. As the arms were constructed entirely of energy, the few scratches they did get from the act immediately regenerated and were made moot.

Naturally, all of his magic hands were also capable of attacking. Colbert being a martial artist meant that, the number of attacks he could execute was purely limited by the number of limbs he had, which, in turn, led to the conclusion that he'd become way deadlier than he'd been before.

One of his many attacks eventually ended up breaking through Fran's defenses and digging straight into her lungs.

"Bughhh"

[Greater Heal]

I managed to get Fran healed up immediately, but I couldn't stop her from momentarily flinching because of the hit. The bit of a stagger that resulted allowed Colbert enough of an opening to follow up with a third flurry.

One of his hands even ended up grabbing onto me. It tried tightening its grip in order to hold me in place the moment it did, but I managed to escape by using Telekinesis. Though I did indeed manage to retreat, I wasn't able to stop him from momentarily restricting Fran's movements, which, once again, caused Colbert to gain yet another shot of momentum.

Fran was still avoiding his attacks and returning fire, but she was doing so with her face warped in pain. Erza had mentioned before that some of the Dimitris Style's practitioners were capable of performing attacks that would permeate into one's body and destroy it from the inside out.

Colbert's attacks were in fact all of that precise type.

Even the ones that struck me instead of Fran carried through my blade and assaulted her hands with shockwave upon shockwave upon shockwave. I attempted to block the effects of his attacks by deploying a series of barriers, but to pretty much no avail. They passed right through them; even the lightest touch would cause Colbert's Qi to flow into her body and damage her internals.

Having Fran continue holding her ground like this was a bad idea. Simply patiently waiting for a chance wasn't going to work.

[It doesn't look like his attacks are just physically based, but I think it might be best for us to point both Physical Damage Resistance and Physical Barrier regardless.]

(Nn! Got it!)

I executed one of the contingencies I'd discussed with Fran earlier and threw 18 points into each of the two skills.

Fran and I had come into the tourney with more than just a few cards in hand. We'd pushed ourselves as hard as we could in order to farm magic stones so I could rank up as quickly as possible — which I did. I'd then just held onto all 66 of the points that we had, just in case we ran into any situations like this one.

Hoarding points and using them in the middle of a battle was much more effective than using them up ahead of time, as having them available meant being able to adjust to our opponents.

⟨A new skill has been unlocked as you have fulfilled all of its prerequisites. Your Physical Barrier and Magical Barrier skills have been merged into the Perfect Barrier skill.⟩

Perfect Barrier seemed to be a pretty damned good skill. Its level 1 output was equivalent to the two other skills' max level outputs combined. The term "perfect" initially led me to believe that the barrier could prevent any and all damage, but I was wrong, as it clearly wasn't completely impregnable. The "perfect" part of its name instead seemed to describe that it could at least attempt to mitigate all types of attacks.

⟨The Physical Damage Resistance skill has reached its maximum level and evolved

into Physical Damage Nullification.〉

And... we also ended up unlocking a skill I'd been expecting, but not really all that keen on getting.

[Let's go, Fran!]

"Nn!"

"What!? How are you suddenly no longer taking damage!?"

Colbert's eyes widened as Fran began stepping forward while completely ignoring all his attacks. He didn't stop, and continued to assault her, but she didn't mind his strikes at all. At first, it seemed like she was trying to take damage in order to dish it out, but that wasn't the case at all. Our two newly obtained skills made it so she didn't have to force herself into a trade.

It'd almost looked like she'd become flat out invincible.

But I was panicking nonetheless.

[Shit, Rumina was right! That nullification skill is eating my mana ridiculously quickly!]

Only a few moments had passed since we'd gotten the skill, but it'd already eaten up a whole 1000 mana. That was just how much energy it took to completely negate Colbert's incoming attacks.

Again, the skill's ridiculous mana consumption was something that Rumina had warned us about. Specifically, something she'd warned us about just before the tournament began.



"Master. That ability of yours is quite the powerful one, but warn you I must."

[Warn me? About what?]

"I ask that you beware of skills capable of nullification. Some magic beasts carry them,

and thus, I believe it very likely for you to one day obtain them. You must take utmost caution in their application.”

“Why caution?”

“Skills carrying effects akin to nullification bear the tendency to consume a great deal of magical energy to actualize their effects. Moreover, the skill’s function is automatic. You will not be able to stop them from activating, and thus, it is quite possible for you to quickly lose all your magical energy should you fight a foe capable of a vicious assault.”

In other words, Flame Invalidation would drain one’s mana pool extremely quickly if one decided to sit in a sea of flames or something.

The one Rumina emphasized as the one we should be the most careful with was Physical Damage Nullification. It was a skill typically possessed by monsters whose bodies were made of energy, so she wasn’t sure exactly what would happen if we were to acquire it. There was a chance it’d end up activating every single time we so much as took a step.

But that wasn’t all. She’d also warned us that nullification-type skills didn’t actually provide invulnerability. Certain skills would just go right through them.

According to Rumina, the Gods had made it so that nullification skills weren’t in fact the highest order of skill one could have. They could be broken through by both skills built to pierce defenses as well as skills containing the Gods’ powers.

Rumina herself had actually bore witness to one of these incidents; she’d seen Ignius use its Godflame skill to roast and kill someone that happened to have the Flame Nullification skill.

She’d warned that it was possible that the Beast Lord’s Golden Flame of Extinction skill also counted as a higher order skill.

“Do not let your guard down. Do not rely on nullification skills should you obtain them.”

“Got it.”

Our case was actually a bit different. We were able to choose whether or not we actually wanted a certain skill to be active, so, it was possible for us to avoid using any nullification skills we had unless we actually really needed them. They were quite perfect as far as trump cards went.

That said, I couldn't actually switch the skill out as of right this moment, as Colbert was still in the middle of attacking us.

[Hurry up Fran! You'll have to finish this real quick!]

"Nn!"

Fran raised me above her head and readied herself to a massive downwards swing — an opening Colbert failed to miss.

"Dimitris Style Secret Technique — Rupturing Strike!"^[1]

He poured his mana into his fist as he twisted it as he shoved it straight into Fran's gut. But it was rendered null. The strike hadn't even caused her to so much as flinch.

"Shit! It had no effect!?"

Colbert's attack hadn't damaged Fran, but it'd contained so much force that it drained another 1000 mana straight from my pool, which, once again confirmed that Colbert was one helluva a foe. I couldn't even imagine how much damage his attack would've done had we not the means to completely negate it.

"Nn!"

Fran leapt into the air and delivered a downwards strike with every last bit of her power.

We activated two instances of Elemental Blade, popped Vibration Blade, Magic Poison Fang and Weight Boost as she drew me from a sheath of wind. Her skill with the katana, which had already been remarkable, had become even more refined because of the Sword Lord Arts skill.

Though we were basically in his face, our attack was one that was incredibly easy to read, and thus, Colbert had an easy time avoiding it.

Or at least he would have, had I not stopped him.

I bound him with both Wind Magic and Telekinesis and prevented him from moving either to the left or right. To him, that much was nothing. He easily shrugged it off, but in doing so, lost the instant he needed to avoid Fran's incoming strike. Realizing that escape had become impossible, he instead quickly opted to use all four of his magical arms to defend himself.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh!"

"Gaarrgghhh!"

But it wasn't enough.

We not only split all his magic-made limbs in two, but also left a giant gash running from his left shoulder to the opposite side of his hip. Both his arms were still fine, but the same couldn't be said for his internals. The majority of the damage had gone straight to his lungs, one of them had even been flat out turned to ash. The flames that cloaked my blade scorched his body and completely turned into a huge mess. The open wound was charred black; smoke wafted off of it alongside a foul, meaty smell.

It looked like he was done for, but we kept going. Colbert was strong. We knew that it was still possible for him to turn everything around despite how grim the situation looked, and so, we continued focusing on refining our magical energies.

[Keep it up! Don't slow down!]

"Nn!"

Fran brought me to her waist and followed up with a powerful horizontal slash.

I figured that Colbert could still fight, but I never expected him to do as he did. That is, he attempted to avoid the attack by leaping backwards and dodging despite his near fatal wound. He then focused his energies back into his magical arms and once again extended them towards us.

The situation was dire. We'd run out of mana if he hit us even just one more time. If we wanted to win this, we had to end it here and now.

Knowing that, I quickly responded by stretching my blade as far as I could.

“Come on!”

[Reach reach reach!]

“Guaagghhh!”

Colbert reached us right as we reached him. We managed to null his attack, but the same couldn't be said for him; my blade tore through his gut and caused his blood to splatter across Fran's face.

He took far too much damage to maintain his concentration, and so, his magic-made arms faded away.

“Sh... it...”

The martial artist fell onto his knees before groaning in pain and collapsing, after which he didn't even so much as twitch. He was bleeding heavily, crimson liquid leaked from his protruding internal organs began turning the stage into a sea of blood. To make matters worse, he was even badly poisoned.

Things were looking really bad.

Invalidating Colbert's last attack had used up the rest of my mana. I was flat dry. I couldn't do anything for him at all.

Fortunately, I didn't need to be the one to heal him. A member of the guild's staff immediately rushed over and did what was necessary in order to save him.

And with that staff member's actions came an enthusiastic announcement.

“It's over! The match has been decided! What a stunning upset, ladies and gentlemen! Today's winner is once again, Fran, the Magic Sword Girl! It looks like she just might end up being the most terrifying dark horse in this tournament's history!”

[1] This technique, in the raw, is Body Destroying Internal Organ Breaker. But that sounds like shit in English, so I just kinda put some random substitute name that kinda sounds martial artsy and has a bit of the meaning in there for now. Let me know if you guys can think of something better.

[2] This type of punch is called called a Seikenzuki in Japanese. Its pretty well known, and even used in a fair bit of media. It's basically the standard Karate punch. You thrust at chest level, with your fist upside down. You then turn it at the moment of impact for that extra bit of oomph.

Chapter 200

Vs Colbert — After

We checked in on Colbert, who'd been carried over to the sickbay, not too long after the match ended. His wounds had been healed by magic, but he'd yet to regain most of his stamina, and so, he was still bedridden and unable to so much as sit up.

"Colbert, feeling okay?"

"Hey... It appears that I've narrowly managed to escape death."

"Very close."

"Hahah. You have me beat. I never expected to lose even after undoing my sea... ugh."

Colbert placed a hand on his head and groaned.

"Okay?"

"Yeah... It seems that I've simply pushed myself a bit too hard. This happens every time I use Asura."

Asura was the technique that caused him to suddenly sprout a bunch of magical arms. My assumption was that said technique boosted both his reaction speed and widened his field of vision, as I failed to see how else he would've been able to fight on par with Fran and her Sword Lord Arts.

"You were strong, stronger than any foe I've ever faced before."

"Thanks."

"Your next opponent will be a tough one, but I believe in you. Beat him, for my sake as well."

"Definitely."

We decided to leave the sick bay after exchanging a few more words with him. As he'd yet to recover, I figured that forcing him into an extended conversation probably wasn't exactly what anyone could call a good idea.

I expected that he'd end up getting some peace and quiet after we left, but apparently the exact opposite happened, as I happened to catch ear of a few panicked shouts just before we wound up out of earshot.

"God damn it! I went overboard and let the blood rush to my head! Damn it! I'm totally going to get excommunicated! There's no way my demon of a Master will let me get away with this!"

His tone made it incredibly easy for me to picture him cradling his head and shaking it in despair. It would've been something interesting to discuss with Fran, but I decided to practice tact and keep any mention of his circumstances to a minimum seeing as how he'd purposefully waited for her to leave before letting his emotions take control of him; he clearly hadn't wanted to show his more pitiful side.

[My condolences, Colbert. My condolences.]

"Nn?"

[Nah, it's nothing. Don't worry about. Let's just go.]



The next thing Fran and I did was head back to the arena. Specifically, we became spectators, as it was probably the best possible use of our time. There was a chance we would end up having to fight the people that emerged victorious today should we win the next round. It's not like we'd be wasting time even if we lost either, as observing these higher leveled fights served to broaden our horizons regardless.

There were only a total of eight matches scheduled today due to the nature of the single elimination tournament structure, and as we fought the second, there were only six for us to observe.

Amanda was the one fighting the day's third match, and had just finished wrapping up right as we managed to get back. She had once again basically finished her foe off in

an instant.

“Didn’t get to see anything.”

[Eh, can’t really be helped. This next match should be interesting enough to make up for it though. Erza’s going to be fighting.]

His opponent was a C ranked adventurer, one known to be rather difficult to fight because of his incredible technical skill with the spear. The battle was honestly one I was really looking forward to and didn’t want to miss.

However, we were at a bit of an impasse. There wasn’t anywhere for us to sit. We contemplated what to do, and I actually almost ended up creating a chair using earth magic, but, fortunately, one of the men nearby called out to us and, in doing so, stopped me before I did.

“Hey, are you Fran? The Magic Sword Girl?”

“Nn?”

He, the middle aged man, was spectating the match with a bottle of wine in one hand, and a skewer in the other. Based on that, I assumed the guy was probably doing pretty well for himself.

“W-Woah, it really is you. I’m guessing you wanted to spectate?”

“Nn.”

“A-Alright, feel free to take my seat then.”

“Really okay?”

“Yeah, go for it. I’ve been betting on you since the prelims, and at this point, you’ve earned me so much cash I can kick back and skip work for the rest of the month.”

Wow, he really has made a lot off us.

The fact that he’s been betting on us since the prelims meant he was probably half doing it to cheer Fran on, and half because he wanted to see if could earn himself a big

ass return off her efforts. That said, I still felt thankful because he had still been rooting for us either way.

“I’ll gladly fork the seat over if you just let me shake your hand so I can brag about it to all my buddies!”

“Got it.”

“Thanks! I’ll be cheering for you tomorrow too, so do your best out there!”

“Nn.”

And so, the man shook Fran’s hand, relinquished his seat to her, and walked away with a bit of a chuckle. My guess was that he’d probably headed somewhere he could comfortably stand around while watching the remaining matches.

Erza’s match began shortly after we sat down. His opponent was as difficult to deal with as his reputation suggested, and managed to stay out of Erza’s range while attacking him with his spear.

However, the spearman’s attacks were a bit too light to actually inflict any damage; Erza ignored all his strikes and managed to brute force charge right at him without really minding the incoming onslaught.

The spearman’s incredible agility allowed him to dodge the attack that came out of it, but seeing that it’d destroyed a part of the arena with just one hit had caused his blood to run cold.

His movements started to dull with time, not because he ran out of stamina, but because the disparity in their attacks’ effectiveness caused him a great mental burden.

He was in a pretty shitty situation, one we’d experienced several times before. His attacks did practically nothing, but everything’d be over for him if he failed to dodge even just once. He wouldn’t be able to rake in a win unless he went out on a limb and shifted to a style that would put a bit more emphasis on pure power, a choice he was hesitant to make given that his opponent’s giant ass mace kept only barely missing him.

It took a him a good bit, but he eventually managed to do it. He made up his mind and

drove his spear straight towards Erza after dodging an attack that left the bigger man off balance. It was the fastest, and most powerful strike he'd demonstrated to date.

The crowd gasped as his spear closed in on Erza's unarmoured upper body.

But it didn't work. The spearman's weapon wasn't able to pierce Erza's skin. It was instead stopped by the bigger man's ridiculously high defenses.

From there, it all went downhill. The man was promptly caught by Erza and dropped to the floor, where he was pinned by a full body technique that rendered him unable to breathe. He ultimately ended up having to surrender with an oxygen deprived wheeze.

[Must suck to be him.]

"Close combat means openings."

[Well, I mean, you're right, but...]

No way I was ever going to let Erza pin Fran to the floor, especially while making full body contact. Just, hell no.

[Pinning techniques are just terrible.]

"Nn. Dangerous."

[In more than one way at that.]

"Nn?"

Erza's match was the only one that'd really been interesting. All the others basically ended in an instant or were kind of boring.

Forrund's match, the fourth match, was so short that it caused the crowd to boo. It didn't even take him five seconds to finish off his opponent.

Phillip, the Krysten family's eldest son, fought the fifth match. It was a harsh battle full of backs and forths, but we'd already seen him fight back in Barbra, so it ended up being kinda dull.

Neither Royce, nor Fermus ended up having to go all out, but they both finished their matches in less than a minute. All I could tell from watching them was that they had even more power hiding beneath the surface.

[We'll have to win tomorrow's match if we even want a chance at fighting any of them.]

"Will definitely win."



We headed to the dungeon after we finished spectating the day's matches so we could not only try out our new skills, but also run a few simulations in order to figure out how we'd go about fighting Goldalfa.

Fortunately, Physical Damage Invalidation didn't actually activate whenever we took a step, but it did consume an incredible amount of mana nonetheless. It'd react regardless of whether we were attacking or defending; half of my mana pool had actually vanished into thin air before I'd even realized any of it was missing.

But, as evidenced by its ability to even nullify the shock generated by our attacks, it was ridiculously potent. Fran was able to punch an ogre many times her size without even feeling the slightest bit of backlash. In a real battle, the skill made it so we were able to ignore any and all of the attacks our opponents used to zone us. It didn't matter whether they slashed at us with swords or whacked us with hammers. None of it had any effect whatsoever.

Likewise, Perfect Barrier also turned out to be pretty useful.

It only consumed as much magical energy as either one of the two barriers that'd merged to create it, but had the full effects of both. The potency of its defenses did still fall short of our newly found nullification skill, but that was to be expected.

In other words, we were pretty much going to end up spamming Perfect Barrier whenever we could, and saving Physical Damage Nullification for when we really needed it.

[Alright, that's enough testing. Let's try figuring out what we should do against Goldalfa.]

The fact that Goldalfa was an axe user made me suspect that we would probably end up having to rely on Physical Damage Nullification if we wanted to beat him. I had no idea exactly how strong he'd get if he used Awakening, but I somehow doubted our defenses would be solid enough to hold off his attacks.

His offenses were but one of my two main concerns. The other was the extent to which he was capable of soaking up damage. The dude had High Speed Regeneration, Strengthened Skin, and over 1k HP to boot. We probably wouldn't be able to beat him by slowly wearing him down; I didn't think we'd be able to beat him in a more drawn out battle.

In other words, if we wanted to beat him without using Physical Damage Nullification, we'd have to not only dodge all his attacks, but also deliver attacks with enough power to break through his defenses and quickly end the match. My conclusion? Things weren't exactly looking up.

We spent a bit of time thinking up hypothetical situations and the skills we'd level to deal with each of them before finally calling it a day.

"Will go visit Rumina."

Fran had already stopped addressing Rumina in the respectful manner that she'd done when they first met — not that the older Black Catkin minded it at all. In fact, she even seemed to enjoy being referred to more casually. The two's relationship almost seemed to have developed into one that was kind of like that of a grandmother and grandchild, a status quo with which both were satisfied.

[Good idea. We might as well go pop in and say hi before we leave.]

"Nn."

We teleported into the room Rumina had made us a few days earlier.

She seemed to immediately pick up on our arrival, as she even ended up greeting us by the door as we entered her quarters.

"Welcome."

“Nn.”

[’Sup.]

“It appears that you have triumphed once again. I believe your next match will be a quarter final round against an A ranked adventurer?”

[Yeap. We’ll be fighting one of the Beast Lord’s subordinates.]

“And will you be attempting victory? I believe you have already satisfied the conditions he has laid before you by winning this morning’s match.”

“Will win. Will force Black Cat Tribe’s strength to be acknowledged.”

[We’re intending on playing every single card we have if that’s what it takes.]

“I see... Very well, I shall say no more regarding the matter. Instead, I will offer you my encouragement. Forward, Fran, to victory!”

“Nn!”

And so, we headed back to the inn after having Rumina tell us a bit more about skills and magic.

Tomorrow, our match would be the first. We had to get up even earlier than usual.

Chapter 201

Vs Goldalfa Part 1

[Looks like it's finally go time.]

"Nn."

[We're going to be up against an A ranker, someone as strong as Amanda. We'll really have to push ourselves if we want to pull a win out of this one.]

"Already know. But-"

[Yeah. Let's win this shit.]

"Nn! Will definitely win!"

We'd actually already leveled a few skills up in preparation for the fight, skills we decided would help us based on what we learned from consulting with Rumina.

"Good morning. It's time for your match to begin. Are you ready?"

One of the tourney's staff members called out to us and informed us that we needed to go.

"Nn. Ready."

"Then please follow me."

Fran walked down the usual corridor in her usual manner. She was pumped and looking forward to the match, but not even the slightest bit nervous.

It had finally come time to put one of the schemes we'd come up with into action — not that it was actually anything grand enough to be denoted as such.

The first thing I did was buffing Fran a whole bunch. Specifically, I'd use support magic

in order raise her stats. She then poured her magical energy into me in order to make use of that magical conductivity stat of mine. Specifically, she emptied herself out, drank a few High Grade Mana Potions to refill her bar, drained her entire tank yet again, and then once again downed a few more pots to top herself off in preparation for the battle. Doing that allowed her to raise my attack a ton without having to put any strain on my blade. Numerically speaking, it ended up getting boosted almost all the way up to 3.7k.

There was a pretty major problem with the strategy we were currently employing, as I was only able to hold the magical energy she charged me with for about 20 minutes. We would have to end the match before my timer ticked all the way down to zero.

[Hey you sure you're alright? You kinda just downed 8 entire mana potions.]

"Fine."

Luckily, it seemed like there wasn't any issue. I honestly felt like this strategy of ours wouldn't actually be possible if it wasn't for Fran's habit of eating as much as she did. Any normal person would probably feel bloated from suddenly drinking 8 glasses worth of stuff.

"Let's go."

[Sure thing.]

Entering the stage caused Fran to be showered with the usual cheers. Evidently, she'd already grown used to them, as hearing them didn't cause any change in her expression.

"And entering from the eastern gate is the girl that's taken this year's tournament by storm, the cute face that's gained an explosive amount of popularity, Fran, the Magic Sword Girl! She's stomped competitor after competitor, and caused upset after upset, a trend she'll need to maintain if she wishes to beat the A ranked adventurer she'll have to face today! Can she do it ladies and gentlemen? We'll have to wait and see!"

The commentator's words almost made it seem like he was rooting for us, which, I kinda did understand. Seeing a kid like Fran give it her all just kinda made you feel like giving her a bit of encouragement. The only people that I could imagine not feeling that way were probably the Blue Cat Tribe's members.

“Do your best Fran!”

“Make sure you win, for our wallets’ sakes!”

“We believe in your Fran! You have to win! The better you do, the more we’ll get to eat tonight!”

All three Scarlet Maidens were present and cheering for us. I kinda felt like they were being a bit too open with their greed, but what mattered wasn’t the reason that they were rooting for us, but rather, the fact that they were.

“And from the western gate we have one the most likely contenders for the championship title, a man that’s crushed every single one of his opponents with an overwhelming display of strength, Goldalfa, the Impenetrable Fortress! His feats have been truly worthy of his A rank status. He’s managed to remain entirely unscathed throughout all the battles he’s won to date! What do you think, ladies, gentlemen? Will he be able to pull off yet another flawless victory? “[1]

Godlafa, like Fran, was also greeted by a ridiculously loud series of cheers. However, he seemed less popular than her, as there were also a couple boos thrown into the mix.

It was almost as if the crowd had already come to the conclusion that Goldalfa would come out on top. To me, it seemed that the people cheering for Fran were cheering in hopes that she’d put up a good fight as opposed to getting defeated in an instant, not because they believed that she’d be able to win. Honestly, it was something to be expected. Fran had been on a winning spree, but she was still just a C ranker. Goldalfa was an A ranker, so there wasn’t really any reason for anyone to suspect that he wasn’t way out of her league.

[I’m looking forward to seeing the looks on everyone’s faces when we prove them wrong.]

“Nn!”

We faced off against Goldalfa at the arena’s center.

The equipment he was wearing today was completely different from the first set we’d seen him in. His armour was much tougher looking; its massive scarlet frame was

decorated with a series of flame-like streaks. Likewise, his axe also gave off a much more intimidating air. It was jet black, and had a design that made it incredibly obvious that its main purpose was to serve as a weapon in times of war.

The armour also seemed to have the ability to block us from properly appraising him. My Eye of Empyrea skill allowed me to at least discern his stats and skills, but I couldn't actually check any details regarding his equips.

"I see you've won your way here."

"Will win today too."

"You're really spirited, and I commend you for it. But you'll need much more than just drive and willpower to defeat me. Come! Come at me with all the strength you have!"

"Planned on it."

Goldalfa didn't seem to be underestimating Fran, not even in the slightest, as he was glaring at her as he would a powerful rival.

The caster quickly went over an interesting detail as the two stared each other down.

"We'll be making use of the Cradle of Time from this match onward, thanks to the Beast Lord and his generosity."

The Cradle of Time was a magic item that allowed one to turn back the clock within a prespecified area, and was set to activate in the case that one of the contestants happened to die. Best part of it was that apparently, the cradle didn't actually affect one's memory, so dying wouldn't meant losing the experience you gained. As one could imagine, it was really a expensive item, and hence, typically saved for the semis and beyond, but this time around, the Beast Lord had decided to sponsor the tourney with a huge chunk of cash. Thus, they were able to start using the item a full round earlier than usual.

In other words, we were able to go all the hell out without really having to worry about dying or killing our opponent. That wasn't the only factor that allowed us to go all out. There were now also a bunch of barriers set up around the arena in order to protect the audience members from any stray attacks.

Battles that included the use of the the Cradle of Time were different from other battles in the sense that there was no ring out option. One could only win by killing their opponent, disabling them, or forcing them to surrender.

“I don’t really think this needs to be said, but I’ll say it regardless. I will not underestimate you simply because you are a Black Catkin as it was a Black Catkin that made me as capable as I am today.”

“Exactly as desired.”

Fran unsheathed me and gave me a light swing as if to demonstrate her resolve.

“And I take it that’s your Magic Sword? Interesting, it truly appears to be much more than just your average blade.”

“You too. Cool armour.”

“This armour is what I wear to battle. Me wearing it serves to prove that I’m taking you seriously. It has Appraisal Blocking, both types of passive recovery, and even Magic Resistance. It was none other than a product crafted by a God-tier Blacksmith, a Magic Armour powerful enough to perform its function, even against a Godblade.”

Wait, wait, you serious!? That’s some shit dude! I mean, it was possible that I was actually be the work of some God-tiered blacksmith too and all that, but that, again, is just a possibility. His armour, on the other hand, was totally the real deal!

I mean, I was pretty confident and all that, but I couldn’t really help but get a bad feeling about that armour of his. Specifically, I was concerned about the possibility that it’d have some sort of secret ability that’d totally wreck us.

“I’ll bring everything right off the bat in order to crush you! Awakening!”

The few visible parts of Goldalfa’s skin were dyed grey as he shouted the skill’s name.

“Woah! It appears that Goldalfa has already awakened! He’s activated what most Beastkin consider their trump card! Can you believe it, ladies and gentlemen!? He’s already gone full throttle even though the match has yet to start! Things are getting heated up! I guess I’d better say, let the match... begin!”

Wait, seriously!? He awakened already!?

Goldalfa's awakening differed greatly from Zefmate's. That is, his stats didn't end up changing. However, the same couldn't be said for his skills. He'd gained a bunch of abilities that looked hard to deal with, namely, Muscles of Steel, Super Fast Reflexes, and Hardened Skin. His High Speed Regeneration had also gained several levels, and shot all the way up to 8. But that wasn't all. Highly dense magical energy had also began circulating throughout his body.

General Information

Name: Goldalfa

Age: 44

Race: Beastkin (White Rhino Tribe / Black Steel Rhino)

Job: Sharpaxer

Status Level: 72/99

HP: 1256

MP: 422

STR: 654

VIT: 582

AGI: 267

INT: 173

MGC: 247

DEX: 299

Skills

Intimidation: Lv 8

Super Herculean Strength: Lv 8

Fist Techniques: Lv 5

Fist Arts: Lv 5

Presence Detection: Lv 3

High Speed Regeneration: Lv 8

Herculean Strength: MAX

Club Techniques: Lv 6

Club Arts: Lv 6

Mining: Lv 8

Regeneration: MAX

Resistance to Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 7

Blink: Lv 3
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 7
Elemental Blade: Lv 8
Greater Earth Resistance: Lv 4
Charge: Lv 7
Axe Techniques: MAX
Axe Arts: MAX
Divine Axe Techniques: Lv 6
Divine Axe Arts: Lv 7
Magic Perception: Lv 3
Vigour Mastery
Muscles of Steel
Goblin Killer
Super Fast Reflexes
Dampened Sense of Pain
Dragon Killer
Strengthened Skin
Hardened Skin

Innate Skills

Awakening
Shockwave

“Nrrrrrrghhhhhhhhh!”

Goldalfa swung his axe downwards without moving from where he stood the moment the match began. The action caused three massive shockwaves to erupt from his axe and assault us.

They were powerful; they were backed by so much brute strength that I was pretty sure that launching those three attacks alone would’ve already been enough for him to instantly defeat most C ranked magic beasts.

It seemed to be an assault he’d launched in order to scout out our strength.

[Let’s go, Fran!]

“Nn.”

[Explosion!]

I fired off a spell to intercept Goldalfa's attack.

The fireball bursted into a massive conflagration as collided with the shockwave and dyed the stage in red.

I took advantage of the resulting smokescreen and teleported us behind Goldalfa.

Fran immediately took advantage of the opening presented and attacked Goldalfa's neck by drawing me from a sheath of wind while activating all the usual skills.

It was both a deadly strike and a perfect sneak attack —

“Gaaaaaahhh!”

— one to which he couldn't react.

My blade sank straight into his neck. I felt it tear through his flesh and bones as his blood sprayed from his newfound injury.

Yet, it left me unsatisfied. I felt myself smashing through a wall of magical energy and a bunch of really tough skin and muscle before even hitting his armour. We'd lost a lot of the power that the strike had initially come with.

The attack that was meant to completely behead him stopped halfway through his neck. We were unable go any deeper because of how insane his defenses were.

That said, our attack had yet to end. We hadn't managed to do what I was hoping, but we'd opened up an opportunity, an opportunity I promptly attempted to take by turning my blade into a series of needles and stabbing them into his innards.

Unfortunately, I was too slow. Goldalfa reacted before I did.

“Shockwave!”

“Gaaahhhh!”

He released a burst of magical energy and sent us flying.

Shit, he has balls!

The dude completely disregarded the fact that we half beheaded him and managed to make a calm, composed decision.

His shockwave did much more than just give him some breathing room. It ate through a huge chunk of both my durability and Fran's HP. All in all, it seemed even more powerful than the thing he'd started the match with.

The Rhinokin immediately chased after us, so Fran had no choice but to dodge his attacks as she choked up blood.

"Gaffff..."

[Greater Heal!]

"Fuu... fuu..."

[You still doing okay?]

"Still okay."

We'd already known long ahead of time, but I felt the urge to reiterate that tanking Goldalfa's attacks was a terrible idea.

[I'm surprised he awakened right off the bat like that. We also failed to actually take him in one go... Oh well, can't be helped. Let's start by stripping away his defenses.]

"Got it."

I did as per the contingency we'd thought up ahead of time and shoved all my remaining points into a certain skill.

[Be careful of his armour. It's completely outside our predictions, and we have no idea what it can do. Either way, we'll have to go in for a melee. Make sure you don't get hit, not even once!]

“Nn!”

“Doraaaaah!”

“Tsk!”

[Shit, he’s already healed up!?!]

Goldalfa leapt at us the moment we finished figuring out what to do. I honestly surprised that his wound had closed *that* quickly. His sheer vitality was terrifying.

The two fighters began exchanging blows, with Fran dishing out lighter attacks in rapid succession, and Goldalfa attempting to land hard hitting, decisive blows.

The Rhinokin seemed to be pretty much spamming axe techniques, as every single one of his swings was accompanied by a shockwave. I was pretty sure he would’ve killed at least 100 spectators had there not been a barrier protecting them. The shockwaves weren’t too-too strong, but taking them head on wasn’t what I could call good for my durability, so Fran ended up dodging or warding off all the hits as opposed to blocking them.

All of Fran’s attacks were aimed at the cracks and seams in Goldalfa’s armour, but we weren’t really able to damage him nearly as much as we expected to. The cuts we gave him immediately closed because he’d just regenerate off the damage; we weren’t able to inflict any lasting wounds.

I tried destroying the armour itself, but even it ended up healing back up immediately after sustaining damage, a trait that honestly wasn’t too unexpected in and of itself given that Fran’s Black Cat Set was capable of doing the exact same.

Another thing I tried was throwing a few spells at him from time to time, but to little effect. Attacking him with magic failed to do anything beyond verifying that he’d been telling the truth when he said that his armour gave him magic resistance. Goldalfa himself had already had ridiculously high physical defense to begin with, so slapping that flashy armour of his onto him basically turned him into a walking fortress.

“Haaaaaaa! Shooockwaaaaaaaaaveeeeeee!”

Goldalfa once again used his innate skill at close range and sent out a blast of magical

energy in every direction. The skill itself was a simple one, but it was incredibly difficult to deal with nonetheless.

At close range, the skill inflicted damage while also messing up our posture. It also appeared to be able to function as a sort of barrier if instead cast at medium range.

More importantly was the fact that it inflicted both physical and magical damage simultaneously; it didn't seem like we would be able to fully negate its effects through the use of Physical Damage Nullification.

We'd managed to mitigate most of the damage this time around by deploying a barrier, but we still did sustain some. Goldalfa had us right where he wanted us. We were currently deadlocked into a stalemate, one he knew Fran would eventually lose because he was able to outsustain her.

Fuck that!

[Urushi!]

“Ruff!”

“Huh. You can even use summoning magic!? Interesting, but doesn't matter. You won't be able to break through my defenses with any sort of attack that lacks in terms of power.”

That was something we already knew. Urushi was pretty strong, but he was indeed the type that relied more on chaining attacks than delivering single, more powerful blows — not that it actually mattered. We didn't call for Urushi because we'd wanted him to deliver a decisive blow. We had other, better plans in mind.

[Keep it up Fran! The plan's working. I managed to absorb some of his mana.]

(Nn!)

The skill I'd leveled up just a bit earlier was in fact Mana Absorption. I didn't have enough points to get it past level 9, but, it was still managing to exactly what I needed it to do regardless.

Fighting Colbert had taught that Physical Damage Nullification wasn't something that

made us invincible. We could still take damage from magic, or anything else in its vein. Plus, the skill consumed a tonne of magical energy.

To that end, we devised a plan that would address both those points at once: absorbing our opponents' magical energy. It allowed us to not only drain mana directly from our opponents, but also from their attacks, which, in turn, would naturally weaken them.

I've had the skill at level 3 for a while. I could've boosted it up back when we were fighting Colbert as well, but I'd decided against it at the time because I didn't know how effective it'd become. I didn't want to make a bet we weren't sure to win, especially given the value of my self-evolution points.

Plus, we still had a few other cards left to play, so I'd kinda been on the fence and ultimately ended up just leaving it.

The reason I was willing to level it now was because we'd asked Rumina and Dias about its effectiveness, and both had told us that it'd get pretty annoying to deal with if leveled.

In fact, it was such a good skill that even Rumina thought it to be dangerous, and so, I'd actually really been looking forward to seeing just how effective it was capable of becoming.

And it really had lived up to its reputation, as I'd managed to drain away Goldalfa's mana bit by bit. The reason we'd called Urushi was because we wanted him to be able to help us land a few more hits, and therefore force Goldalfa to use Regeneration and drain his mana even more quickly.

Fran casted a dark-type elemental blade, and continued attacking her opponent as often as she could. She still wasn't able to inflict any significant damage on him, again, that didn't matter, as we were stealing more mana from him than his armour could passively recover.

Long story short, the name of the game was to make him run out of mana before finishing him off with a single blow.

"Huh? That's... strange..."

The A ranked adventurer realized his mana was draining more quickly than usual, but

he didn't seem to have caught onto the fact it was because I was absorbing it. That said, he didn't panic. He kept his cool and switched to what he believed to be the best possible strategy.

"Nuooooooooooooooooo!"

He suddenly cast all manner of defense aside and raised his axe above his head in order to deliver a powerful, almost desperate seeming downwards swing. It was an attack that would totally mince Fran to pieces should it land, but it was far too obvious for her not to dodge.

But it seemed that he hadn't been aiming for her to begin with.

"Groundshaker!"

Instead, he'd been directed his aim towards the stage itself. A series of cracks expanded from where his axe landed and shot all the way through the arena.

The force of the impact caused the battlefield to shake. His technique appeared to be one that caused a local earthquake, and in doing so, prevented one's opponents from moving around. It looked to be about a magnitude 7 on the Japanese scale, or a 10-12 on the Mercalli scale, as it heavily restricted both Fran's and Urushi's actions.

"Mmph!"

"Woooff?"

[He was aiming for the stage itself!?!]

The axe that'd been embedded inside of the arena came flying into Fran's torso immediately after the ground began shaking. Goldalfa had suddenly started moving much more quickly than he had throughout the rest of the battle's duration, likely an effect caused by him combining his Super Fast Reflexes skill with a technique that emphasized speed over all else. He moved at such a speed that even I, who'd been speeding up my thoughts with space/time magic, had a hard time processing, so there was simply no way for Fran would be able to react to his assault while also dealing with the earthquake.

[Short Jump!]

I immediately teleported us away from him and casted a few spells on Fran.

“Gebuu...”

[Greater Heal! Greater Heal! Greater Heal!]

The attack was basically the opposite of the one we’d finished Colbert off with. That is, it completely gouged out Fran’s stomach. Her innards had come flowing out from the wound together with her blood as she vomited both her vital fluid and her stomach acid simultaneously. I was honestly surprised she didn’t just instantly die from the shock.

[Fran!]

“Still... okay...! Bfuh...”

Her legs seemed a bit unsteady, but she managed to stand up, spit out the blood she had in her mouth, and recover before the Cradle of Time activated.

“Oraaaahhh!”

[Shit, he’s not letting up!]

Goldalfa didn’t pull back because Fran had healed. In fact, it’d actually caused him to immediately begin chasing after her yet again.

(Now! My turn!)

Fran had just had a giant gaping hole torn in her stomach, but she wasn’t feeling even the slightest bit discouraged. In fact, she was as far from backing down as could be. Taking the hit had only fueled her battlelust further.

[¹] Literal is Varja Wall, but I localized it because I feel like Varja is much less understood here than it is over there.

Chapter 202

The Phoenix's Armour

Goldalfa once again smashed his axe into the ground after rushing up to us.

“Groundshaker!”

He attacked us the exact same way he had earlier. The slash that followed after his Groundshaker was undoubtedly fast, but the same couldn't be said for Groundshaker itself. Hence, I was able to react and equip Physical Damage Nullification before he came at us with the follow up.

“Nuuun!”

“Useless.”

“Impossible!”

Goldalfa wasn't the only one react with surprise. The audience had done the exact same, for his attack had seemed to stop immediately as it was about to land on Fran. Rather, it seemed to have been made to stop by some sort of invisible wall.

That, combined with the fact that Fran hadn't moved or even recoiled from Goldalfa's attack despite the disparity in strength, caused the scene to almost seem surreal.

Both the girl and wolf took advantage of the opening created and began assaulting him so we could once again drain his magical energy. The two large scale attacks he'd just performed had already eaten away at his supply. He no longer had enough to even last a minute.

“Cheyaaa!”

“Nuuuun!”

He tried retaliating with a few quick strikes of his own, but he wasn't capable of

matching her speed, and so, he ended up running flat out of mana.

“Ugh! My mana’s dry...!”

Running out of mana caused the effects of his Awakening skill to fade away alongside several skills and the incredible magical energy that bolstered his defenses. It had finally come time for us to finish him; we had to win before his armour managed to restore his mana.

[Short Jump!]

We teleported behind Goldalfa in an attempt to once again execute the attack we’d hit him with right when the battle began.

“Nuun!”

“Kuh!”

However, we weren’t greeted by the exposed, unprotected back we’d been hoping for. Instead, our sights were focused on the battleaxe that came flying straight towards us the moment we moved.

The actual movement part of teleportation was instant, but there was a brief delay between when one disappeared and when one reappeared.

Though he’d lost his Super Fast Reflexes skill, he still managed to predict our actions and cope with them. I couldn’t tell exactly why that was, but suspected it was either driven by his experience as a warrior, or more simply, his intuition as a Beastkin.

Either way, we ended up getting sent flying the moment we arrived at our destination. Fran managed to use me to block the strike, but we felt a powerful shock from it nonetheless.

Worst of all was that it confused me. I didn’t know where we were supposed to aim next. I considered attempting his front, his left, and his right, but wasn’t able to come to a decision. From there, I moved on to considering leaving Physical Damage Nullification on and just going for whatever, but again, I wasn’t able to immediately make my decision. Fortunately for us, Fran wasn’t nearly as wishy washy as me, and immediately figured out what she wanted to do.

(Master, up! Will use attack that can't be stopped even if noticed.)

[Got it.]

(Urushi. Stay, distract.)

(Woof!)

[Long Jump!]

I teleported us way up above the arena. Goldalfa immediately looked around in an attempt to find where Fran went, but didn't think to check the right up above him. The same went for both the audience and the caster, neither tried looking up.

"Wow! Fran seems to have suddenly vanished into thin air! Just what is going on!? Did she turn invisible, did she teleport somewhere, or did maybe even dive into the shadows!?"

Little did the caster know, the correct answer was none of the above.

I kept myself afloat with Telekinesis as Fran stood atop the side of my blade and concentrated while manipulating several skills simultaneously.

"Ready."

It took a few moments to get everything prepared.

[Aight.]

Fran leapt off me, grabbed me, and then began running straight down towards the arena.

She used Air Compression and Magic Thread Weaving to launch herself. She then transitioned into casting Sky Leap and Charge alongside a few wind-based spells in order to accelerate herself even further as she plunged straight towards the ground. She also readied herself to activate weight boost the moment before she landed to double her power while also cloaking my blade with both lightning and flame.

It was exactly the technique she'd used back when we fought Rynford — save for the fact that it was more potent.

This time, she'd started from higher up, and also boosted her speed even more through the application of Space/Time Magic. She'd also become much more skilled in the art of drawing her sword and attacking in a single motion thanks to Sword Lord Arts, and obtained a boost to what was basically every single one of her skills because of Vigour Mastery. As a result, the resulting slash was many times more powerful than it'd been back then.

“Brilliant Lightning Rush!”^[1]

She took things even further by activating the Innate Skill she'd only just learned a few days back, and in doing so, cloaked her body in lightning and accelerated herself even further.

Fran practically became a spear constructed solely of light as she descended upon Goldalfa like a meteorite.

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

“Where in the-”

A bright flash of light filled the arena as Fran hit Goldalfa so hard she caused a massive shockwave to run through the entire venue. With the attack came a thundering roar so loud it rocked my very core.

“Gggaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!!”

Goldalfa let out a roar halfway between a scream and a battlecry as he was assaulted by the attack.

[Short Jump!]

I teleported us over to the edge of the arena immediately before Fran actually hit the ground.

The place where Goldalfa had been standing had become a giant crater with clouds of dust swirling around it. Looking at the aftermath really deepened my impression of

the attack. It was absurdly powerful; it alone had managed to cut my durability in half. The dust clouds didn't remain for too long. They were soon blown away as a bunch of magical energy swelled up from inside the area.

What we saw left us just as shocked as Goldalfa and the audience had been when Fran had totally stopped the Rhinokin's attack.

[That's impossible! How the hell is he regenerating without any mana!?!]

We'd taken Goldalfa down to a knee. his right arm was flat out gone, and the parts of his right half that did remain had been totally crushed alongside his crimson armour. His body's fluids were spouting out from the gaps within the crushed metal protector. Likewise, his left arm had also been totally crushed, and his left foot obviously fractured. I was pretty sure we'd done a hell of a lot of damage to his internals as well.

But he didn't die. In fact, he'd begun healing at an incredible rate.

What he was going through could no longer be described as just High Speed Regeneration. It was much more akin to Instantaneous Regeneration. The exact same thing was happening to his armour. It too was regenerating and repairing itself at a similar pace. It only took him a few seconds to return to his prior state. It almost looked as if we'd never actually attacked him in the first place.

"Haa... Ha... I never expected you to be able to force my armour to save my life this early on in the battle..."

He stood himself back up as the words left his mouth.

"The armour I'm wearing is called the Phoenix's Armour. It allows its wearer to recover incredibly quickly."

Yeah, I could kinda tell just by looking.

He literally healed himself up in an instant. His armour already made him hella tanky as is. Him getting the ability to instantly regenerate any injuries on top of all that practically made him a walking nightmare.

How many times could he use that shit anyways? I highly doubted it was something he could do in perpetuity, but I also highly doubted it was a one off thing either. It was

something made by a God-tier Blacksmith. I couldn't even begin to imagine just how powerful it really was.

(Master! Again!)

[I don't think we'll be able to play the same card twice. I'm pretty sure he'd just counter.]

(...Got it.)

The reason we'd been avoiding just teleporting around all the time was because we were worried our opponents would figure out how they were supposed to deal with it after seeing it put to use.

Teleporting still seemed risky even if our opponents didn't know about it. Fran was able to react and deal with the Demon we fought back then despite his ability to lurk in the shadows, and he'd been much stronger than she was. It was possible for teleporting to end up just being a trap against more powerful foes because they'd end up figuring it out at first glance.

Besides, that whole falling thing we did really left an impression, so it definitely wasn't something that could catch someone off guard multiple times in quick succession.

That was important and all, but glancing at Goldalfa had led me to immediately shelve any further thoughts on the subject.

"Awakened?"

[Yeah. His mana's all the way back up to full.]

Everything we'd done to drain his magical energy had gone down the toilet. We basically ended up being put back in the exact same situation we'd started off at, but in worse condition.

I couldn't help but feel the urge to call his armour out on being a bullshit OP equip, not that I really had the right to.

(No choice. Will have to use *that*)

[Yeah... I guess so.]

Draining his mana again would be pointless, as his armour was sure to restore it. And so, we decided to change up our strategy.

There was a big of lag time between him getting injured and his Instantaneous Regeneration actually popping. In other words, we'd be able to take him down so long as we killed him before the skill actually activated. It was honestly a rather simple plan, but it was also really the only thing we could actually try.

[The only problem is that you're not really adjusted to it yet. Your body won't hold if you keep it up for too long, so try ending it asap.]

(Know already.)

[Keep in mind that I won't have Physical Damage Nullification up. You'll be moving way too quickly for me to be able to turn it on and off.]

(Planned that from start.)

Fran had totally resolved herself for what was to come, so I decided to do the same. The tournament was effectively a safe space. The Cradle of Time made it so we wouldn't die no matter what happened, and so, I figured there was no harm in playing a riskier card that we'd normally shy away from.

"Urushi. Support from shadows."

"Woof!"

"Going now."

This tournament was one we'd done everything we could to prepare for. Me, I'd ranked myself up by farming up Magic Stone Points.

But what about Fran then? What exactly did she do?

The answer to that question was a simple one.

"Awakening."

She evolved.

Chapter 203

Black Lightning

“Awakening”

An incredible amount of magical energy swelled up within Fran’s body the moment she muttered the word, after which her small frame began emitting jet black streaks of lighting.

Her magical energies ran rampant and kicked up a windstorm in her wake. Goldalfa stood within it, completely dumbfounded.

“Awak... ening...?”

“Nn.”

“A Black Catkin just... awakened...?”

Our opponent had forced our hand and made us pull out our trump card, one we’d only managed to obtain with Rumina’s help.

In other words, Fran had accomplished her goal. She had finally evolved.

Fran’s appearance hadn’t really changed much. She didn’t suddenly grow a coat of fur or have her skin change colours. She didn’t magically turn into an adult or anything like that either. The few changes that did occur were a lot more minute.

The first change lay in the colour of her eyes, which ended up dying themselves gold. The second and more significant change came with her tail, which she had currently straightened out and pointed towards the sky like a lightning rod. If one were to pay extra close attention, they’d be able to notice that her tail was no longer a pure shade of black. It instead now had alternating black and ash-grey stripes throughout.

That was it. Honestly, the outward changes caused by her awakening could be said to appear rather plain in comparison to the others we’d seen thus far.

Most of her changes had instead been directed within, and boy, were those changes massive.

Her Agility and Magic stats had both risen by an entire 300. The wounds she'd suffered had healed, and she'd instantly recovered all her magical energy.

But that wasn't all.

The most terrifying change was the one that'd occurred to the skill she'd gained upon evolving.

"Brilliant Lightning Rush."

Fran's Brilliant Lightning Rush was an even more powerful version of the Lightning Rush skill Rumina had showed us upon our first encounter.

It was already a powerful skill under normal circumstances, as it provided or bolstered the levels of the Strength Boost, Agility Boost, Super Fast Reflexes, Lightning Element Bestowal, Lightning Boost, Lightning Damage Nullification, and Lightning Magic skills.

To reiterate, using Awakening made this skill even more powerful, namely by doubling all its effects.

"Would look at that ladies and gentlemen!? Fran has awakened! It appears she's got the rarer type of awakening, the one that doesn't particularly change one's appearance, but you can really feel a sense of majesty from the black lightning radiating off her body!"

If Fran had just evolved, she would've been like Rumina. The lightning emanating off her body would've been blue and not black.

But it wasn't.

Fran hadn't evolved into a mere Black Tigerkin. She'd instead become a creature spoken of only in legends, a Black Heavenly Tigerkin.

"Apparently Black Catkin being unable to evolve is nothing but just a load of bogus!"

The caster's reaction was pretty much the same as most of the other humans present. He was surprised, but that was it. As far as he was concerned, there was much more interest to be in had in how much stronger Fran had gotten than the fact that she'd actually evolved.

It was a reaction that completely failed to capture the emotions of any and all of the Beastkin that happened to be present.

"..."

Goldalfa seemed to have totally forgotten that he was in the midst of a duel. His stance loosened, and he simply stood staring with his mouth gaping wide open. He was so shocked by what he'd just witnessed that he was unable to put any his thoughts into words.

Directing my gaze over to the VIP area allowed me to see the Beast Lord, who was supposed to be calmly sitting in his chair, leaning on the railings and staring a hole straight into the stadium. Roche, who'd been standing by beside him, was practically sharing Goldalfa's expression; he was staring at her completely dumbfounded.

"A Black Heavenly Tiger?"

Goldalfa's mind had finally started to move again, but he was still clearly shaken, as his voice was dry and raspy.

"To think that I would end up facing off against none other than one of the legendary tribe's members..."

His words were but mutters under his breath.

"But... how did I not notice it till just now...?"

(Go?)

[Do it!]

Fran took advantage of the fact that he was wide open and initiated an assault.

“She vanishe-ugghhh!”

“Shmph!”

“Guhhhh! W-What...!?”

To Goldalfa, it looked as if Fran had flat out vanished, but in truth, all she'd done was dash up to him. The Black Lightning within and all around her pierced right through the God-tier blacksmith made armour he was wearing and began scorching his flesh.

Awakening had made Fran ridiculously powerful.

It had given her enough speed to circumvent Goldalfa's super fast reflexes and enough power to completely shatter his defenses.

“Gaaah! Gruhhhh!”

“Haaaaah!”

Fran dashed around him and continued delivering blow after blow.

From this, one could observe that the Brilliant Lightning Rush skill's power came not only from its sheer speed, but also its ability to allow incredibly sharp turns.

The maneuvers we were pulling off were difficult even at much lower speeds. The laws of physics would get in the way and disallow us from actualizing our ideas.

But the skill made it so that they didn't apply; engraving the core attributes of the lightning element into her body had allowed her to temporarily overcome them.

Our actions were much like those of Zefmate's. We assaulted our opponent while making use of our ability to move around at exceedingly high speeds.

That said, the actual resulting attacks couldn't really be compared to one another, as Fran far exceeded Zefmate in all three of power, speed, and turn rate.

Thinking about Zefmate made me realize something, something that seemed to explain why Blue Catkin hated Black Catkin as much as they did. It must've been because of this, because evolved Black Catkin could do everything evolved Blue Catkin

could, but better.

“H-How incredible! I can’t even tell what’s going on! Fran’s disappeared, and seemingly started attacking Goldalfa with a series of bands of black light! I can only tell he’s getting hit because he keeps groaning in pain!”

It was as the caster commented. Each of Fran’s movements was leaving a trail of black light in its wake. The sheer number of them almost made it seem like there was a giant dark dome around the rhinokin.

Loud metallic clangs rang throughout the arena as Fran smashed me into Goldalfa’s Phoenix Armour over and over again. The damage we inflicted onto the armour was more or less completely nulled, as it regenerated at a rate far faster than we could damage it. However, that only applied to the armour, and not Goldalfa himself. His flesh wasn’t able to recover quickly enough from our consecutive strikes; we were managing to stack up damage on him.

It was something that couldn’t be helped, as the Black Lightning would course throughout his body each and every single time he tanked one of Fran’s strikes.

“Ngaaaaahh!”

We managed to hurt him so badly in just the span of a few seconds that he ended up completely giving up on defense. Instead, he swung his axe at us before desperately launching shockwave in all directions. It seemed to be an action he’d done in hopes of hitting us so he could attempt to make a comeback.

But it was too slow. Fran dodged it with ease by simply lowering her stance to avoid the incoming axe, an action that served to evidence that she’d totally seem him through.

Likewise, she dealt with the shockwave with ease as well; all she needed to do to neutralize it was deploy a Perfect Barrier with her full power. The sheer amount of magical energy she put into the act caused the barrier to be unable to last for more than just an instant, but that was all she needed. She didn’t have any issues timing it well enough to completely negate Goldalfa’s attack.

Her relentless assault continued despite his struggles.

“Guhh... nrhhhh...”

The short exchange of blows caused Goldalfa to realize that it was no longer possible for him to hit Fran, and so, he folded his arms and shrank the size of his frame as much as he could while making sure he protected his head. The stance almost seemed to resemble the kind one would take after accidentally ramming one's face into something on accident and recoiling in pain, but, it wasn't actually one that illustrated a will to surrender. In fact, it was something he'd done in order to win — he'd completely abandoned even the notion of attacking and instead focused all his resources on his defenses.

[Damn it, that's one of the Beast Lord's direct subordinates for you! He knows exactly what our weakness is!]

Brilliant Lightning Rush was an incredible skill, but as one could expect, it naturally came with a cost. It placed an abnormally large burden on Fran's body, and constantly ate away at both her health and mana. It didn't require as much compensation as something like Latent Potential Release, but again, it wasn't what I could call risk free.

Rumina had told us that all of the Ten Original Tribes in fact had their innate skills function in a similar manner. The power of the Divine Beast was far too great for a mere Beastkin to sustain and would lead to death if left unchecked, hence why the ability was instantiated in the form of a toggleable skill as opposed to simply granted permanently.

The Beast Lord had naturally awakened to one of the Ten Original Powers, and thus, there was no way Goldalfa, as one of his guards, would be able to go without knowing about its weaknesses. He knew that using the skill was effectively the same thing as slowly killing oneself, hence why he'd chosen to attempt to stall Fran out.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Ngggh..... Ugghh!”

Goldalfa didn't have that much health left, but Fran had yet to show any sign of letting up.

Brilliant Lightning Rush was definitely a risky skill to use, and not something one could keep up for too long.

Or at least that's how things it would've been under normal circumstances.

Fran's case, our case, wasn't like any other. Fran's mana pool wasn't just limited by her own mana. She could draw from mine should she need it. I was also capable of healing her and topping her health off whenever.

As a result, we were able to sustain the skill for far longer than Goldalfa expected.

"How are you... still going arrgh!?"

That said, it wasn't like we had any real extra breathing space. The rate at which Fran's HP was draining was steadily increasing. We'd never kept the skill going for any extended period of time, so we only now learned that its resource consumption would gradually increase with the duration for which we sustained it.

Goldalfa's HP dropped to less than 10% of its total value.

All we needed to finish him was just one last push, one that was rather difficult for us to pull off. Fran's HP had started dropping so quickly that I needed to heal her every couple seconds.

It was something that she herself had noticed as well.

(Master, will end now!)

It seemed that we could've actually just deactivated the skill and fought him normally from here on out. In fact, that was probably the better option to take if we just wanted to go for the win.

But Fran didn't.

She wanted to win as through the use of her power as a Black Heavenly Tigerkin in order to put her tribe's pride and sheer willpower on display.

That was simply a choice that she decided to make, a choice she'd long set in stone.

(Will hit with more powerful attack.)

[You sure? There really isn't enough room for that here.]

(No problem!)

[You really sure?]

(Nn!)

[Well, if you say so... I'll focus on defense.]

(Thanks.)

[Urushi, go hit him once real quick then run the hell away.]

(Woof!)

Urushi did exactly as we instructed and harassed Goldalfa a bit by suddenly jumping out of his shadows, hitting him once, and jumping back in before teleporting into the barrier that protected the tournament's spectators.

Fran immediately shouted the name of an incredibly powerful attack the moment she verified that he'd retreated to safety.

"Black Lightning Advent!"

A jet black thunderbolt as wide as a drum of liquid erupted from Fran's extended palm and swallowed Goldalfa whole before detonating into a massive electrical explosion.

Our eardrums nearly burst as the sound waves created by the attack assaulted them.

"Nn...!"

I protected Fran by activating Perfect barrier, but the blast was far too powerful for that alone to hold it back. The sheer resulting force sent Fran flying into the barrier that protected the audience. To it, her mass was about as insignificant as that of a single leaf. Dust assaulted our bodies as hundreds upon hundreds of pebbles flew at us faster than would bullets. A wave of heat then rammed its way into us, one so hot it would've turned Fran to ash had she been unprotected.

[Shit! We're eating this much recoil even though I put up a goddamn barrier!?!]

Countless bolts of lightning raged through the arena and writhed within it as would a swarm of dragons, an assault Fran herself only managed to survive due to her Lightning Damage Nullification skill. I'd protected myself with a barrier, so I managed to get away with just a minimal bit of damage.

(Went bit overboard.)

Whaddya mean a bit... Is what I would've liked to say had I been sure that our strike had managed to finish Goldalfa off.

The audience began to stir as the attack's after effects finally started to fade.

There was a massive crater where Goldalfa had been standing just moments ago. The stage itself had already gotten pretty messed up because of all the backs and forths the two fighters had experienced, but what Fran had just done was on a whole 'nother scale. She'd completely obliterated over 70% of the arena.

Goldalfa was at the crater's center, his body reduced to nothing but a mangled carcass. He was on both knees, his head hanging forward. His body didn't seem to twitch even in the slightest.

We couldn't see him all that well because the sheer amount of heat caused by Fran's attack had caused his surroundings to distort. The dirt around him had been raised to such a temperature that it'd even transformed into red-hot glass. The Rhinokin's prided Phoenix Armour was crumbling, with half of it already gone. It seemed to have been damaged so badly that it'd become unable to repair itself. All visible parts of his body had long been turned to charcoal. I was no longer able to see the *thing* that had formerly been Goldalfa as a entity that bore life.

"Got him?"

[Oh god damn it Fran! You're not supposed to say that, you're totally jinxing it right now!]

"Nn?"

Fortunately, my idiotic worries were needless. The pillars placed around the arena began to glow, and seemed to cause Goldalfa's remains to do the same.

The mangled corpse was returned to its former state after about ten seconds. His body was once again in perfect shape. It was like he'd never been wounded to begin with.

Wait, so... does that mean it's over...?

"And it looks like the Cradle of Time has activated, meaning Goldalfa has lost the round by meeting his demise! Ladies and gentlemen, our winner today is none other than Fran, The Magic Sword Girl!"

Chapter 204

The Events that Took Place The Day Before the Tournament Began

The Martial Arts Tournament was set to begin tomorrow.

Fran, Urushi, and I were doing the usual thing and honing our skills within the Eastern Dungeon.

[Hey Fran, I think it's about time you take a break.]

"Little longer."

[You sure? You seem to be losing focus.]

Fran had pushed herself to fight for such an extended duration that she'd started to show signs of mental exhaustion. She'd started to accumulate a good bit of damage from both mistakes in and out of combat. In other words, she'd started getting worse at both noticing and disarming the traps she came across.

"...Little bit longer."

In spite of all that, she ended up refusing. She simply bit down on her lips and narrowed her eyes as she scoured the area for another enemy to engage.

[Haaaahh... Fine. Just a little longer then.]

I was a bit concerned that she wouldn't be in her best possible condition for the prelims tomorrow if she pushed herself any further, but ended up complying regardless.

In a sense, being in top form was also exactly why she was pushing herself as hard as she was in the first place. Fran wanted to evolve before ultimately having to face off against the Beast Lord, but she wasn't showing any signs of doing so. Hence, she only

ended up feeling the need to push herself even harder.

[Would you happen to have a moment?]

We suddenly heard Rumina's voice resound through our minds as we continued pushing ourselves onwards.

"Rumina?"

Hearing her voice just pop out of nowhere had left me a bit surprised, but I soon managed to calm down as she just seemed to be using something that resembled my telepathic abilities.

[I have a matter I wish to discuss with you, and would like you to pay me a visit if you do not mind it.]

"Got it."

Though I was a bit curious as to why she went as far as to call for us, I ended up deciding to take her up on her offer immediately. Her timing was pretty good seeing as how Fran needed a break, and she was also kinda just a teleport away, so there wasn't really any inconvenience associated with us dropping by.

Rumina greeted us as we teleported into the room she'd made for us.

"I... welcome you..."

"Nn."

[Well, you did tell us to drop by, so.]

"Indeed I did..."

Something about her seemed a bit off. She appeared to have less magical energy than usual, and kinda just gave off a bit of a frailer impression overall. It'd almost seemed like something bad had happened to her.

"Rumina, doing okay?"

“I apologize for worrying you. You need not mind me, I am simply feeling a tad exhausted.”

[You sure you’re okay?]

“I am fine. More importantly, I would like to offer the two of you a trial. Have you any interest in it?”

[You said a trial?]

“A trial indeed. I cannot describe its details, but would like for you to to partake in it. What say you?”

The fact that she couldn’t tell us any details was kinda fishy, but I highly doubted that Rumina would try throwing us under a bus or luring us into a trap.

“Be warned, the trial will be an exceedingly dangerous one.”

“Got it.”

Fran didn’t seem to doubt Rumina even in the slightest, as so she immediately nodded and acknowledged that she knew that she was going to be getting herself into something difficult should we accept.

I figured that there was practically no way Fran was going to choose to refuse Rumina’s request given how close the two had become, but ended up deciding to quickly double check her intentions regardless.

[You want to take her up on this whole trial thing, Fran?]

“Of course.”

[You 100% sure? The fact that Rumina’s going out of her way and saying its dangerous probably means it’s *really* dangerous.]

“Don’t care.”

It looked like Fran had already made up her mind and wasn’t planning on changing it.

“I take it you wish to accept my trial then?”

“Nn!”

Rumina had us head over to the massive room in which she’d sparred with Fran.

Entering it caused us to catch sight of something that left us feeling completely overwhelmed.

[Is that supposed to be a magic circle?]

“Huge.”

The enormous magic circle filled basically what was the entire 100 meter wide room. It was created in such a way that its parts extended into a sort of radial pattern with its point of origin at the room’s center. The independent pieces all came together at the edges to form a single massive design.

It wasn’t like any of the other magic circles I’d seen to date. None of them were on this big a scale.

I couldn’t even begin to fathom what this one was supposed to be used for.

“I shall now proceed to summon a Magic Beast. Demonstrate to me that you are capable of defeating it.”

Rumina’s voice almost seemed to sound like it was coming over an intercom or PA System.

“Nn. Got it.”

So our trial was to defeat some sort of Magic Beast? Why that of all things? We’d been doing that for quite some time already. Was fighting the thing she was summoning going to benefit us in some particular manner...?

“Very well. Begin!”

The magic circle began shining as an incredible amount of magical energy suddenly started getting concentrated into the circle’s centerpoint. Strong winds swirled

around the room in response, winds powerful enough to make a complete mess of Fran's hair. She had no choice but to squint in order to observe the energy as it took on it lumped itself together.

A single magic beast revealed itself once the magical energy that formed it finally dimmed and vanished.

"Hah... hah..."

Controlling all that energy had caused Rumina to begin panting rather heavily.

"Rumina. Something wrong?"

"I... am fine... Mind me not..."

The fact that she didn't sound even the slightest bit fine served to evidence that the act of summoning whatever it was she wanted us to fight had taken one hell of a lot of magical energy.

What appeared before us was a humanoid creature with its entire body dyed jet black. The dark miasma enveloping its body made it difficult for me to make out its form, but I assumed it was something not too different from a Kobold given that its head and whatnot seemed to be covered in fur.

However, appraising it allowed me to determine that it was something so fiendish and powerful that a Kobold couldn't even begin to compare. It looked even more powerful than the pillbug we fought the other day. It didn't have too many skills, but, its stats were ridiculously high, as if to compensate.

General Information

Species: Evil Manbeast. (Evil Apparition-type Magic Beast)

Level: 50

HP: 822

MP: 927

STR: 335

VIT: 402

AGI: 1028

INT: 12
MGC: 809
DEX: 166

Skills

Evasion: Lv 9
Fang Techniques: Lv 8
Fang Arts: Lv 8
Presence Detection: Lv 9
Instantaneous Regeneration: Lv 8
Blink: Lv 8
Magic Resist: Lv 5
Reinforced Fur

Innate Skills

Awakening

Description: Unknown

Huh... It apparently had the Awakening skill...?

“Defeat it... and absorb its magic stone...”

I knew it! This was something she’d summoned so she could help Fran evolve!

Still, summoning it had totally exhausted her. It seemed that not even a Dungeon Master could pull off something like this without having to really push themselves.

Fran seemed to understand that, as her expression had transformed and become more determined than it had ever been before.

“Master, let’s go!”

[Let’s do it!]

Fran immediately drew me and engaged the magic beast in close quarters combat.

“Gaaaurouooooououuu!”

“Mmph!”

“Gagauuu!”

“Kuh!”

Holy crap was that thing fast. It moved so quickly it was able to avoid Fran’s attacks with ease and even throw in a few counters. Moreover, it also basically instantly healed all the wounds we inflicted upon it.

“Gaaoooooruuuuu!”

“Mmph.”

[And now it’s gone and awakened!]

The entire magic beast’s body seemed to swell up in size. Most notable were its fangs and claws, both of which doubled in length. It’d gotten stronger stat-wise as well. Its agility in particular had totally skyrocketed so much that I’d actually lost the ability to keep up with it. Its hands almost seemed to disappear each and every single time they moved.

We were able to fight it because we had access to Sword Lord Arts, but, its obscenely high agility stat made engaging it extremely difficult. Its Presence Detection skill made it so we couldn’t even hit it if we tried getting the jump on it by teleporting.

I figured we’d have an easier time hitting it if we just used magic, but, it had access to the Magic Resistance skill, so we wouldn’t be able to deal any real damage to unless we hit it *really* hard. Knowing that, I tried hitting it with an Inferno Burst immediately after it avoided one of Fran’s attacks.

“Gugyaa!”

Tsk.

I clicked my tongue. The attack worked, but it didn’t work well enough. The magic beast had both a high health pool and a decent magic stat. Those two factors, when combined with its Magic Resistance, meant we wouldn’t be able to finish it off in a

single strike, which in turn meant that it would just end up regenerating.

“Troublesome.”

[I know right? It looks we won't be able to finish it off unless we kill it in a single blow.]

“Nn.”

We quickly devised a plan to deal with the situation, albeit a rather simple one. Urushi and I were to slow down the magic beast with surprise attacks and Telekinesis respectively while Fran went in for the kill.

The plan's execution went pretty well. Fran initiated by attempting one of her sword drawing techniques, which caused the magic beast to attempt to dodge, but Urushi latched onto its foot while I restrained it, and so, she ended up landing her strike.

It was a full forced, reckless blow. I figured there was no point in conserving my durability, as we needed to end the battle immediately if we actually wanted to win it. Thus, I threw in as many skills as I possibly could in an attempt to use my entire mana pool. We also activated a whole bunch of different elemental blades despite the fact that doing so was sure to damage me so badly I'd end up temporarily unusable. Specifically, Fran activated lightning, while I pitched in with both wind and fire.

“Haaah!”

[Let's do this!!!!]

“Gyaggyaaooooohhhh!”

The magic beast panicked and attempted to do everything it could to escape us.

But it was already far too late.

Fran's strike had already landed and separated the Magic Beast's left and right halves. I'd felt its magic stone, which had been located within its heart, split into two cleanly cut pieces.

Our attack had drained the hell out of my durability. I had less than 20% remaining. Cracks ran down my blade as it slowly began to crumble. Still, it was worth it,

especially since selling what was left of the creature we'd just killed was sure to earn us a pretty penny.

Both the considerations I just mentioned were honestly nothing but mere afterthoughts. I was instead much more focused on my skill page. That is, I was hurriedly looking through my memory in hopes of finding the skill I'd just obtained.

[Where the hell... Found it!]

The skill I'd been looking for and the skill I just found was Awakening.

[We did it Fran!]

"Nn...!"

[Should I swap it in right away?]

"Please."

I equipped the skill, thereby allowing Fran to make use of it. I felt like I was soaring above the clouds, but did my best to stay calm so I could immediately inform her that the deed had been done.

[Should be done now. You feel anything?]

"Nn... Can use it."

Her affirmation doubled as confirmation that she was now finally capable of evolving. Given that, I settled down and silently waited for her to do the deed.

"Fu... Hah... Nn! Awakening!"

She took a couple deep breaths before activating the skill and causing the amount of magical energy within her to skyrocket.

[Looks like it's working!]

"Woof!"

Black lightning started erupting from within her and rampaging through her surroundings. The storm of both electricity and wind that engulfed the room forced both Urushi and I to retreat from where she was while pondering whether or not she was actually okay.

[Hey Fran! You alright!?]

“Ruff ruff!”

She didn’t respond even though we called out to her, which in turn led me to worry that she’d lost control of her abilities.

Fortunately, that wasn’t actually the case. The raging energies around her eventually settled down to reveal her with both her tail and ears completely straightened out. A second look made me realize that her tail was actually a bit different how it normally was. It’d become striped, with alternating shades of its usual black and a slightly lighter, ash-grey shade. The difference between the two colours was so minute that I could only barely make it out because of the magical illumination that filled our surroundings.

“Gmph...”

Large teardrops began flowing down Fran’s cheeks.

Her dearest wish had just been fulfilled.

I didn’t need to ask to know that countless memories and emotions were swirling about within her.

I remained silent as I approached her and gently, telekinetically stroked her back.

She grabbed onto my handle and used me to support herself as she began to cry.

She eventually ended up collapsing forward and pressing her forehead against the flat of my blade. Feeling both her warmth and pulse almost made me want to join her in crying despite the fact that I was a sword.

In fact, I wasn’t the only one that’d started feeling that way, as Urushi, who’d snuggled up against her, had started to tear up as well.

“Whimper.”

“ .. ”



It took about 10 minutes for Fran to finally stop crying.

She rubbed her eyes, stood up, and showed a bit of a shy smile before rubbing Urushi’s head, as if to hide the fact that she felt embarrassed.

“Sorry.”

[Don’t worry about it. We know how much this means to you.]

“Thanks.”

[Alright, how about we check everything over real quick?]

“Nn!”

Fran sniffled one last time before tightening up her expression. She looked down her hands as she opened and closed them in order to feel out exactly what about her had changed.

[Well? How do you feel?]

“Nn... Overflowing with power.”

[Hmmm, well you don’t look too different, so I guess I’d better check your sta-WHAT THE FUCK!?!]

Seeing Fran’s stat page force me me into a state of shock.

Her agility and magic stats had both been boosted by 300. Her HP and Mana had both been completely topped off, and she’d even gained an innate skill by the name of Brilliant Lightning Rush, all seemingly because she’d used Awakening.

[Evolving sure does come with some pretty impressive looking effects. Wait a second...]

Glancing over Fran's stat page again had caused me to do a double take. I'd assumed that she'd turned into a Black Tigerkin because that was what Rumina was, but I was wrong.

[Hey Fran, you uh... kinda just became a Black Heavenly Tigerkin.]

The Black Heavenly Tigerkin were legendary Beastkin that were by no means weaker than the Golden Flame Lionkin that held the Beast Lord's throne.

[I wonder what all this is supposed to mean...]

" ... "

[What do you think, Fran?]

" ... "

[Fran...? Urushi...? Hello? Helllllo...?]

" ... "

" ... "

Both my companions had suddenly gone dead silent.

Taking a second glance at them made me realize that they'd completely stopped moving too. They weren't even so much as twitching or anything like that at all. They were simply unmoving. It was almost like someone had stopped time, and that someone couldn't have possibly been me given that I hadn't used Space/Time magic at all.

"The hell's going on?"

Darkness came out of nowhere and swallowed my surroundings as I asked the question. I couldn't process what'd happened. It was almost like my sense of sight had been completely turned off.

T-The hell just happened? Are Fran and Urushi both still fine?

“Don’t worry. Nothing’s happened to them. I’ve just temporarily stopped time for everyone but you.”

[Huh? What?]

“You sure have gone and done it now... I never would’ve thought it was possible for you to allow her to evolve the way you did.”

[Huh?]

“You meeting her, that young Black Catkin girl, was nothing short of a miracle in and of itself already. I never expected the two of you to get *this* far.”

[Uhhh. So who exactly are you?]

“I’m one of the individuals governing over this world and its ways. I guess the most understandable way for me to explain my identity to you would be for me to name myself as Goddess of Chaos.”

Chapter 205

The Goddess of Chaos

I couldn't help but stare at the woman that'd called herself the Goddess of Chaos.

Her claim was one that was a little bit more than a little bit hard to believe. The Goddess of Chaos was supposed to be the goddess that gave rise to dungeons, and thus, I'd expected her to be someone that exuded an air of magnificence, dignity, and grandeur.

The woman in front of me, however, gave off what was more or less the exact opposite impression. To me, she looked like an absurdly beautiful woman with tanned skin and silvery hair. The only air she gave off was one of an adult woman's seductiveness; her outfit was composed of nothing more than just a few thin pieces of cloth.

However, she'd proven herself capable of stopping time for everyone but me, an act that should've been impossible for anything but a god. Realizing that caused my gut to promptly inform me that I'd gotten myself into something troublesome.

"Wow, troublesome? That's mean of you."

[Huh?]

W-Wait, can she read my mind!?

"I can."

[I-I'm so sorry!]

Aw fuck. I hope I didn't piss her off. Angering her seems like a really bad idea given how divine retribution is apparently actually a thing here.

I'm sorry! I swear I don't think of you as troublesome. In fact, I hold nothing but respect for you. I'm telling the truth here! Having the opportunity to meet someone as beautiful as yourself had totally moved me and thrown my thoughts into disarray!

“Kufufufufu. There’s no point trying to flatter me. I can tell exactly what you’re really feeling just by looking at your soul.”

[Awww shit. Uhh...]

“People like you are pretty rare. Most people have a bit more respect for the gods.”

[Oh come on. I do respect you! I swear I do!]

“I don’t particularly mind how you feel about me. I’m not petty enough to be angered by anything that insignificant.”

[S-so does that mean you’re not going give me divine retribution for being blasphemous or anything like that...?]

“Don’t worry about it.”

Oh thank fucking god! I’d totally expected the gods to be unreasonable tyrants because of the punishment they’d given to the Black Cat Tribe.

“I do have a more dignified appearance. I purposefully only ever send a part of myself into the human realm and mold its form so that it appears like that of a human. It can’t really be helped that I don’t appear all that god-like as I am now. Likewise, I also attempt to speak the same language as those I descend upon. Speaking of which, I think this is probably the most casual conversation I’ve had with a mortal to date.”

The fact that she’d only sent a part of herself to see me reminded me of something I’d heard back when I still lived on the Earth. I think people used to say something along the lines of “seeing god’s true form will make you lose both your sight and sanity.” That aside though, what was important was the fact that she’d only taken human form because she’d wanted to talk to me in particular.

“We’d never actually expected any faith from you in the first place, given that you were summoned from another world.”

[Huh? Wait, you guys knew that I was from another world?]

“Of course we did, but let’s leave that aside for now and maybe come back to it some

other time. There's something much more important I want to talk to you about."

[I'm guessing you want to talk about Fran and how she's evolved?]

"You got it."

Hmm... Well, a goddess literally just went out of her way to talk to me, so, I guess that pretty much confirms that the Black Cat Tribe really is suffering from some sort of divine retribution.

"Exactly. The Black Cat Tribe has committed a mortal sin, and thus, we've made it more difficult for them to evolve."

[So you're here to talk about the method I used to make Fran evolve...?]

"Looks like you've gotten straight to the point. That's right. The method you used was one we'd never accounted for. It's outside all our predictions, and honestly speaking, quite problematic."

I mean, I knew we kinda cheated the system, but I never would've thought what we did was bad enough to merit divine intervention. Wait, shit, does that mean Fran's g-

"Don't worry. I won't do anything to harm her, nor will I revert her to her original state."

W-whew. Well, I guess that means we've at least managed to dodge the bullet — not that we were actually totally scot-free just yet.

"So, have you figured out why I came to see you in particular?"

[Uhhhh... Because I cheated the system?]

"Nope. That isn't the only issue I came to discuss with you."

[Huh? Really?]

"I wouldn't have bothered descending if that was all there was to it."

Wait, what? What exactly was the issue then?

“Naturally, that isn’t to say that you cheating the system poses us no issues altogether, as it means that you’re defying the very principles the world runs on.”

[The world’s principles?]

“Would it be easier for you to understand me if I called the world’s principles the system on top of which it’s based? Consider, for example, if the entire world was operating within the framework of something like a computer program.”

Oh, so there’s like a big overarching system that everything else runs on? I guess that must be where the System Announcer comes from?

“Most beastkin typically learn the Awakening skill upon reaching their level cap. Using the skill allows them to awaken the power that lies within them and prompts them to evolve.”

I guess that means there’s actually 5 stages involved in the evolution process? It looks kinda like: Hit level cap -> Unlock Awakening -> Use Awakening -> Draw out latent potential -> Evolve?

“The Black Cat Tribe has been cursed, and thus, as I’m sure you know, its members need to do more than just reach their maximum levels.”

[Yeah, I’m following you since that’s kinda how things went with Fran.]

“She managed to bypass the principles set, obtain the Awakening skill, and evolve. It seemed that she was a rather talented individual as well, as she’d acquired the skill for herself with just a single use of it. What concerns me is that the exact same thing may continue to happen going forward.”

[Oh, I get it. So what you’re trying to say is that anyone could evolve so long as they just equipped me.]

“Yeah, and that’s exactly the problem. There would be no point in the divine retribution if equipping you allowed any and all to bypass it, and that’s simply not something I can overlook.”

The goddess stared right at me as she spoke.

Wait, doesn't that kinda maybe mean that I might just be neck deep in shit?

Chapter 206

Of Sin and Retribution

I returned the goddess' gaze as I felt a fit of nervousness wash over me, to which she responded by raising a pair of fingers and speaking another line. ^[1]

"The Black Catkin are shackled, no, cursed, precisely because they'd incurred divine retribution. There are two manners in which this curse of theirs can be undone, each with their own unique conditions."

I-I guess that must mean I'm not totally screwed? Whew! God damn, she had me shivering in my boots for a second there.

"The first of the two possibilities requires a single individual to slay either a single Evil Being ranked in at A or higher, or a thousand weaker ones. Fulfilling one of these two conditions releases that individual in particular from the curse, and allows them to evolve."

Wait, is it really okay for me to know that? I could've sworn Rumina wasn't allowed to say anything about it. Hadn't the gods like totally gone out of their way to obscure the fact that Black Catkin could even evolve? Like I could've sworn they flat out deleted it from everyone's memory.

"Your wielder has already evolved. Rumina isn't restricted from discussing the topic with any other evolved Black Catkin, so she's most likely going to tell you once time unfreezes regardless. Given that, I decided that I might as well tell you right now since that was what we were talking about anyway."

[O-Oh, I see.]

But like, Urushi and I were kinda both there too, and neither of us were Black Catkin, let alone evolved ones, so wouldn't Rumina ultimately not actually have to chance to tell Fran about the Black Cat Tribe's circumstances? It seemed that they wouldn't reach our ears even if the two ended up being able to discuss them amongst themselves too.

I mean, I'm not complaining or anything. I'm totally down for soaking up information because the goddess forgot she shouldn't tell me or decided to be loose lipped or something.

"It's fine. You're allowed to tell any familiars you summon whatever you want, so the dog doesn't count. And you're one of my kin, so you don't count either."

Welp, she totally just read me like a book again. Wait. Did she just say what I thought she said? I kinda felt like I just happened to hear something that totally blew my mind.

[Did uh... you just say that I'm one of your kin?]

"Well, it would technically be more precise to say that I am one of the many individuals bound to you as kin."

[C-Could you tell me a bit more about all that?]

"Nope, since we have to finish talking about evolution."

Ugh... I mean I guess she's right, but god damn did she get me curious.

"The other possible scenario requires the Black Cat Tribe to defeat either a S ranked Evil Being, or one of the Evil God's kin without any assistance. Performing said feat would free not only the battle's participants, but the entire Black Cat Tribe from their curse. They would once again be regain their status as one of the Ten Original Tribes."

Man, redeeming the whole race sounds kinda tough.

"It's only fair given the graveness of their sin."

[So uh, what exactly did they do to deserve all this anyways?]

I'd only just realized that the goddess kept going on and on about grave and mortal sins, but had actually refrained from mentioning exactly what it was the Black Cat Tribe had done.

"One of the Black Cat Tribe's chiefs, or rather, one of the former Beast Lords, had undone the Evil God's seal and allowed his clan's members to absorb its power in

order to bolster their combat prowess. It was a dangerous ploy, and one that had half succeeded.”

Wait, is absorbing the Evil God’s power actually different from turning into an Evil Being?

“It’s far worse than just that. A fair portion of the royal family’s members evolved into what I can only call a half Evil God, half-beastkin being. Half of the Black Catkin had succeeded in absorbing the Evil God’s power. However, many also became Evil Beings, lost control of themselves, and ended up being put down by their tribesman. We, the gods, couldn’t stand the sight of the Evil God’s powers being put the use in such a selfish manner. Thus, we eliminated the royal family and any other individuals that had obtained the Evil God’s power before administering the survivors with a punishment, one that hindered their ability to evolve.”

Well uh... apparently they did something much worse than what I’d been expecting them to do. Like, using the Evil God’s power to evolve into creatures that were effectively demi-gods clearly made it seem like they were picking fights with the actual gods. Like, I’m not really sure what else they’d expected to happen.

[Alright, I get that what they did was pretty serious.]

“You existing in your current state allows the Black Cat Tribe’s members to evolve without first atoning for their sins.”

The goddess didn’t glare me, but I kinda felt like she wasn’t exactly what you could call happy with me given the tone of her voice.

“I understand that the Black Cat Tribe’s members may consider evolution to be one of their greatest desires. That, however, fails to justify exploiting a loophole in the system and evolving without first making up for their mistakes. Continuing to circumvent their punishment is an act that can be regarded as yet another sin, one that would incur an even greater punishment.”

[An even greater punishment? Care to uh... elaborate?]

“Extinction.”

[T-That’s kinda...]

"I was just talking in terms of what ifs. I want you to understand just how serious the topic at hand is."

[A-Alright, I get it.]

My interactions with the goddess led me to the conclusion that the gods were both terrifying and a huge pain in the ass to deal with. Yeah uh, her going out of her way to talk to me like this *definitely* meant I'd gotten myself into some deep ass shit.

[So uh, what exactly should I do? I mean, I understand that I shouldn't use my powers to evolve anyone other than Fran, and I can swear I won't.]

"I know that you really do mean what you just said, but, that alone isn't enough. The fact stands that you're a magical item capable of granting your wielder the ability to use the the Awakening skill, an item I cannot possibly allow to exist."

She can't allow me to exist? Does that mean she's going to...

"Calm down. I don't have any intention of doing anything as violent as eliminating you."

[A-Alright!]

Whew! Holy shit, and I glad she's telling me that. She had me really worried there for a second. Man, that situation just there was probably the most dangerous one I'd ever been in.

"I'll fix everything right away."

Snap

[Huh? What'd you just do...?]

The Goddess of Chaos snapped her fingers and caused my blade to momentarily begin shining. I could tell that she'd done something to me, but I wasn't too sure exactly what that something was.

"I've made it so you're bound to your wielder."

[Bound?]

“Yup. I’ve made it so you can only have one wielder at once. No one else will be able to equip you until your current wielder dies. Anyone that forcibly does so anyway will receive retribution.”

[Whaddya mean by retribution?]

“Anyone that tries equipping you will be met with a form of punishment. Those that don’t know of your circumstances will just be slightly shocked. Those that do know of your circumstances will likely lose their lives as compensation.”

That’s hella terrifying, but it kinda didn’t really matter anyways because I hadn’t planned on letting anyone other than Fran equipping me to begin with. Hence, the end result was basically like me gaining a built in anti-theft device.

“I’ll also be taking the Awakening skill away from you just in case, and making it impossible for you to obtain it going forward.”

I was a bit disappointed by the fact that I wouldn’t get to use the skill myself at all, but, I didn’t really mind because I didn’t want to disobey the goddess, especially given how thorough she was being.

“Awakening only works on Beastkin to begin with, as it allows them to unleash the powers that lie dormant within them. There’s no point in you using it to begin with.”

[Oh. Right.]

Welp, I guess there really isn’t any point in me having the skill at all then.

“I’ll also make it so Rumina won’t be able to ever summon another Magic Beast capable of Awakening — not that she’d be able to for several hundred years anyway, given how much it’s exhausted her.”

[Oh, so does that mean Rumina was only all frail and stuff because she had to summon that magic beast?]

“That’s right. Rumina, as one of my kin, has been restricted in her ability to aid Black

Catkin. She's unable to speak about the subject, but that isn't nearly all. I've also banned her from creating items capable of conferring the Awakening skill, and made it so that she'll destroy herself if she helps any Black Catkin fulfill their evolution conditions."

[Huh?]

Wait, you serious!? Doesn't that mean Rumina's going to—

"Calm down. She's not dead, or will she die from what she's done."

[Even though Fran's managed to evolve?]

"Yes, and though she provided assistance, it wasn't direct assistance. She didn't directly give the girl what she needed. She'd instead helped you help her. She's lost a great deal of her power as a result, but she won't die."

Whew. That's good. Fran would've felt *really* bad if she'd learned that her evolving had caused Rumina's death.

"That said, I cannot allow the same thing to occur in the future, which is why I've now restricted her even further."

Rumina seemed to have pushed herself quite a bit to make everything come together the way it did. I guess this also means that she wasn't kidding when she'd asked Fran if she'd be willing to kill her in order to evolve.

"It would be unfair of me to take a skill away from you without compensating you in any which way, so I'll switch your Awakening skill out for a different one."

The goddess snapped her fingers once again.

I immediately looked at my stats because I was curious as to what had changed.

[Uhh... Evolution Concealment?]

"The skill does as its name suggests, and allows one to hide the fact that one has evolved, most notably from other beastkin."

The Extra Skill I'd obtained seemed like a pretty damned good one. Having people find out about Fran's newfound evolution would probably kick up a huge fuss, so it looked like it'd be one we could put to use immediately.

There was, however, a bit of a problem.

[Err... I think I just lost 5 Self-Evolution Points.]

"Just saying, you caused a problem significant enough to necessitate my interference. It's only natural that I still do take something from you. Just be glad I did you a favour and decided to give you a new skill to replace the one I took away."

[S-Sorry.]

Eh, you know what, the skill I got was worth it, so I guess I'll just call it even, especially since I doubted anything would come out of me bitching and complaining anyways.

The goddess nodded as if satisfied after verifying that I wasn't going to voice any more complaints. She then started floating into the air and growing transparent.

"My business here is done, so I'll be taking my leave."

Realizing that the goddess was totally leaving caused me to immediately begin questioning her.

[Hey wait! There's still something I want to ask you! Just what the hell am I? You must know, right? Given how you said I'm one of your kin and all that?]

I couldn't help but ask her about myself seeing as how she was one of the first people to have a clear idea as to exactly what I was.

"Well... Telling you that isn't something I'm supposed to be responsible for, so I guess I'll just give you a hint. Go meet the god-tier blacksmith that resides in the Beastkin's Country."

[You mean the one the Beast Lord rules?]

I recalled that Old Man Gallus had stated that all of the god-tier blacksmiths were MIA...

However, the goddess' words seemed to imply that his words hadn't necessarily been correct. Did that mean that the Beast Lord secretly had one serving him or something? Heading to the Beast Lord's country didn't exactly sound easy. It was on a different continent, and led by one of our enemies. There was no way I could go, especially not with Fran in tow seeing as how it'd put her in danger.

"The Blacksmith in question may be able to provide you with additional information, though, I cannot say for sure this will really be the case."

[So not even you know?]

"I don't. Not even we, the gods, can predict the future."

[Even though you're gods? Being able to see into the future totally seems like a god-like thing to do...]

"The fact remains that we can't. You, and many others seem to have made the mistake of assuming that gods are capable of determining one's fate and reading into what'll happen later down the road, but that isn't the case. Despite that, many believe in destiny. They think that the gods govern the precise ups and downs of their lives."

You know, that is kinda true. Even I kinda ended up thinking that me meeting Fran was an act of fate.

"They think that the gods have all under their control, that the world follows a precise, predetermined blueprint."

[Yeah, I get what you mean. I mean, a lot of people don't actually believe in something *that* exaggerated, but there are a good deal of people who believe in something kinda along those lines.]

"But you see, there wouldn't be a need for me to appear to you as I had if that were the case."

[You've got a pretty good point, now that you mention it.]

"Destiny doesn't exist. Fate is nothing but a series of coincidences. What I mean is, you are responsible for what happens to you, regardless of whether that thing happens to

be good or bad.”

I guess that means that me meeting Fran was just a coincidence?

“Exactly. You meeting her was just a coincidence. You two being capable of working together as well as you do is also a coincidence. Likewise, you meeting all the right people along the way was also a coincidence, one I would even call a miracle.”

For some odd reason, hearing the goddess’ declaration kinda made me feel a bit embarrassed.

“I’ve already said quite a bit, but I’ll throw in one last statement. I, as the goddess of Chaos, am expecting something great from the two of you.”

Her words made me kinda happy, an emotion I actually wasn’t really sure whether or not it was okay for me to be feeling given the current circumstances.

“Fufufufu. That’s a question I don’t know the answer to.”

[Hey, wait up!]

“Farewell. I bid you a nice, healthy dose of chaos.”

The goddess disappeared after voicing one final, sinister-sounding line. I couldn’t help but feel as if she’d totally just cursed me.

[1] Localized. What she actually does is raise a finger as she talks. This normally involves placing it near one’s face, and in general is an action that’s supposed to have a bit of cuteness to it. I couldn’t figure out how to make this work in such a way that its meaning could be intuited by an English reader, so I said fuck it.

Chapter 207

The Black Cat Tribe and the Goddess

We headed back over to Rumina shortly after I finished talking to the Goddess.

“I am glad that you have both managed to evolve and remain in good health.”

I’d yet to switch in the Evolution Concealment skill I’d just gotten, so Rumina was immediately able to figure out that Fran had evolved.

“Nn. Thanks.”

“And it appears that your evolution came with quite the pleasant surprise...”

Rumina trailed off and remained silent for a few seconds as she gazed at Fran. Her emotions were clear from the look on her face. She was both pleased and shocked.

“I... I had failed to even fathom the possibility that you would become a Black Heavenly Tigerkin.”

Honestly, I, as a non-beastkin, didn’t really understand just how much it meant for one to evolve into a Black Heavenly Tigerkin, and thus, I didn’t feel the sense of impact that should’ve accompanied Fran’s ascension even after coming to realize that Rumina had started casting the younger Black Catkin a meek, respectful gaze.

Thinking about it a bit more deeply caused me to realize that she’d basically become the stuff of legends, especially seeing as how even Rumina herself was just a regular Black Tigerkin.

[So what exactly does one need to do in order to evolve into a Black Heavenly Tigerkin in the first place?]

“Hmm... It fortunately appears that I have become capable of explaining Fran’s circumstances to you given her evolution.”

Right, I remember the Goddess making mention of that.

“Black Catkin must fulfill three requirements in order to evolve into Black Heavenly Tigerkin. The first two are numerical, and relate to the agility and magic stats in particular. The third is the ability to use Lightning Magic.”

Equipping me allowed Fran to fulfill all necessary conditions, especially seeing as how my Skill Sharing ability made it so that my skills were treated as if they were her own.

“I never did suspect that you would fulfill all necessary conditions despite my awareness of Master’s abilities. Rather, I did not expect the conditions to take the bonuses provided by his abilities into account. I believe that you, Fran, are the first Black Heavenly Tigerkin not to be of the royal bloodline.”

[You serious?]

“Indeed I am. I dare say that the two of you encountering one another was nothing short of a miracle.”

[That’s what the Goddess said too.]

“You have heard the Goddess speak!? Does that mean you have met with her!?”

I once again was left feeling a bit bewildered because of how Rumina ended up suddenly drawing closer to Fran with her face painted full of shock. But again, I managed to make a bit of sense out of the situation after thinking it through. Rumina was a Dungeon Master, and therefore, one of the Goddess of Chaos’ kin. In other words, there was basically no reason for her not to be a devout believer.

“Not me. Only Master.”

“M-Master, could you please elaborate!?”

Though I was aware of her circumstances, I didn’t really get why hearing about my conversation with the goddess had totally gotten the Black Tigerkin all fired up and excited.

Like, seriously, what the hell? I’d been expecting Rumina to resent the Goddess of Chaos given that she seemed to be responsible for the curse that’d been afflicting the

Black Cat Tribe for the past 500 odd years. She'd administered a collective punishment that involved pretty much all the tribe's members despite the fact that many of them hadn't deserved to be held responsible. In fact, the decision seemed to have been one made and mandated by the former royal family.

I decided to ask Rumina for a bit of an explanation, which in turn made her switch to an expression that was much more difficult to read.

"I do admit to have entertained the thought on at least one occasion... However, one must consider that the gods differ greatly from us mortals."

Some gods, like the God of Nature, were so fundamentally different from the races that they held no tolerance for their actions. As a result, the punishments and retributions delivered by gods like the God of Nature were often considered harsh and unjust.

I remember hearing mention of stuff like that back on Earth, and so, I honestly wasn't all that surprised by it. I'd heard many tales of people regarded the gods as unreasonable because the two parties weren't able to come to any sort of mutual understanding. It was only natural that different gods would have different standards, and that many of these standards would vary from the ones mortals would find reasonable.

"The Goddess of Chaos is one of the more understanding gods, as she shares many a similarity with the mortal races."

The hell's that supposed to mean?

"It was none other than she that deprived the Black Catkin of their ability to evolve and wiped all memories of their evolutions."

[Wasn't that just her oppressing you guys?]

"I believe it to be the opposite."

Apparently, the Goddess of Chaos had done a lot for the Black Cat Tribe as a whole. Many of the other gods had demanded that the entire race be purged, but she'd managed to talk them down and negotiate. That is, she managed to get the other gods to agree to a compromise in that allowed them to survive in exchange for a difficult trial and the erasure of any and all memories relating to the Black Cat Tribe's former

glory.

“The gods miscommunicated and misunderstood each other. They had only robbed the non-beastkin races of their memories. The few Black Catkin that had avoided the gods’ retribution still knew of their evolutionary methods. Likewise, the same applied to all the other Beastkin races. Thus, the Black Cat Tribe found itself capable of passing on its knowledge through works of literature.”

[So how’d all that knowledge and stuff end up getting lost between then and now?]

“That was in fact a result of the actions perpetrated by the new Beast Lord and his subordinates, the Blue Catkin. They stole and erased all the literature and records they could while selling the Black Cat Tribe’s members into slavery. They forbade the act of disclosing any information relating to the Black Cat Tribe’s evolutionary methods and in doing so, prevented our tribe’s newborn members from learning them. The passage of time amplified the effects of their bans and ultimately eliminated the very notion that we Black Catkin were capable of evolution.”

[Alright, I get that. I can totally see why you hate both the Beast Lord and the Blue Catkin, and that all makes sense to me, but, like, there’s still one thing I don’t get. How do you not resent the Gods for what they’ve done? Like, seriously. The Divine Punishment they threw at you guys is the whole reason you guys ended up turning into slaves for what was a whole 500 years.]

“Don’t understand either.”

Fran agreed with me given that she’d just learned about everything that happened, but Rumina, who happened to know much more than us, didn’t.

“Undoing the Evil God’s seal and thereby endangering the entire world is an act that merits none other than our tribe’s complete and utter destruction. If given the choice, I would prefer to describe the span of time that has elapsed as a mere 500 years as opposed to an entire 500 years.”

It wasn’t until Rumina mentioned literally destroying the entire world that I realized the weight the Black Cat Tribe’s sin, and a bit of further thought led me to realize that 500 years wasn’t actually all that much here considering there were elves and whatnot.

“I would also venture to claim that we, as a tribe, deserved to lose access to the throne and descend into slavery. Our behaviour was once nothing short of tyrannical, as evidenced by our downfall. We would have been assisted by many a tribe had we been reasonable rulers and beloved by our people. I do pity our tribe’s modern members, I lament the need for them to bear their ancestors’ sins, but even so, I harbour only the slightest bit of resentment for the gods.”

She, unlike us, didn’t really feel that the gods were in the wrong. In fact, she seemed to feel extremely grateful that the Goddess of Chaos had managed to prevent the other gods from driving the Black Cat Tribe to extinction.

“I believe that should function to answer your questions. Might you now be willing to elaborate on the Goddess’ words?”

I figured that there wasn’t really any point in being all secretive around Rumina, so I decided to just tell her everything I’d been told.

That said, half the stuff the Goddess told me was stuff she definitely already knew, so I kinda expected the conversation to end up revolving around evolution and the fact that the Goddess had jacked my Awakening skill.

[The weird part is that we’d kinda already defeated something that should’ve counted as an A ranked Evil Being in the past...]

There was no way Rynford wasn’t at least an A ranked threat, and we were 100% sure we killed him. Fran not being able to evolve in spite of that didn’t really make all that much sense.

“Was that act one you accomplished with the aid of any other individuals?”

“Yeah, we had a few other adventurers help us out.”

“I believe that is why. The condition allows only a single individual to evolve. Thus, the curse should only be undone in the case that one functions to defeat an A ranked Evil Being as an individual.”

In other words, anyone that wanted to evolve would have to clear the trial’s conditions without any help.

Rumina suddenly bowed her head and apologized to Fran as I shifted topics and brought up the Black Cat Tribe's sins.

"I am sorry."

"Nn?"

"I was once in a role akin to that of one of the royal family's advisors. Despite my position, I was unable to convince the royal family's members to cease their actions, but in doing so, incurred their displeasure. Thus, I was removed from my post. I was unable to regain my honor. I became an adventurer and then a Dungeon Master. Since then, I have simply lived, and nothing more."

"Not your fault."

"That is not true, not in the slightest! It should have been possible for me to convince them and change their minds!"

Rumina's failure was clearly bothering her, and had likely been on her mind for the entirety of the past 500 years. I could tell that she'd been blaming herself, that she thought it was her fault, and not the gods', that the Black Cat Tribe had been forced to suffer.

That would explain why she was so eager and willing to harm herself in order to help Fran evolve. She definitely had taken a liking to Fran, but that wasn't all. She'd also wanted to atone.

"I would... also like to apologize for putting you in danger's wake."

Hearing me describe my conversation with the Goddess had caused her to issue yet another apology with her face paled. It seemed she was worried that we'd managed to incur the gods' wrath.

"Not your fault. No mistakes."

"That is not true. My considerations were far too shallow."

The look on her face was terrifyingly sincere.

“I mind not facing my own demise, but risking yours is a mistake that that my life alone would not suffice to correct.”

“Rumina, dying not allowed.”

Fran gazed at Rumina with a pained look on her face. Even just thinking about Rumina one day upping and vanishing had made her start feeling a sense of sorrow.

“There was nothing else I could have possibly done for you.”

“Don’t need to do anything.”

“I...”

“Staying by my side, more than enough.”

Fran’s spoke in a soft but clear tone of voice as she latched onto Rumina, hugged her, and buried her face in her chest.

The older Black Catkin directed her gaze down at Fran with a bit of a troubled look on her face, but she ended up gently stroking her back regardless.

“I recall Kiara had once said those precise words.”

“Nn.”

“It is almost as if nothing has changed, despite the passage of over 50 years.”

Both parties ended up smiling awkwardly as soon as they’d calmed down. Neither seemed used to the roles they’d suddenly taken; Fran was unaccustomed to being doted on, whereas Rumina was unaccustomed to being fawned on.

Rumina was a bit tired, so she ended up taking a seat and leaning back into her chair after they separated.

[Oh yeah, Rumina, how are you feeling anyways?]

I recalled the Goddess saying something about how Rumina had exhausted herself or her energies or something. She’d probably been pushing herself real hard.

“It will not take long for I myself to recover. However, I will require a significant amount of time to recover the power that I had been storing up as this dungeon’s master.”

The dungeon was going to end up being easier to deal with, but that wasn’t actually really a problem at all given that Dias was doing a bunch on his end in order to make sure she didn’t end up getting killed.

“I would be more concerned about yourselves than me. Fortunately, it appears that the skill the goddess bestowed to you should allow you to remain unhindered in your activities.”

[I’m pretty sure there’s not really much for anyone to be worrying about on our end.]

“Master, am I correct in my understanding that the Goddess’ restrictions were applied to you, but not Fran?”

[Yup, pretty much.]

“I believe that should in turn mean that Fran is allowed to share information that relates to the Black Cat Tribe’s evolutionary methods.”

[Oh, you too?]

“Indeed.”

[You sure it’s okay though? She kinda cheated the system a bit.]

Rumina’s conclusion was one I’d come to as well, but I wasn’t 100% sure whether or not she’d actually be allowed to talk about it.

“I highly doubt that the Goddess merely overlooked the possibility of Fran disclosing the information you were provided. Did she make any particular mention of actions you were disallowed from taking?”

[Not at all.]

“I cannot possibly claim that I am capable of understanding the gods’ thoughts.

However, I believe that you are permitted to speak of any fact they do not explicitly restrict you from conveying in situations akin to the one we have at hand. Your ability to discuss the topic with myself should serve as enough evidence to prove my hypothesis.”

I couldn’t really tell whether or not we were able to discuss the topic because the system simply happened to work that way, or if it was instead because the Goddess of Chaos had decided to allow it out of goodwill, but either way, it seemed like we were allowed to convey a fact that had a good chance of plunging the world into chaos if we weren’t careful about how we relayed it.

“It would be to your benefit to direct your attention away from the gods and instead towards other beastkin. It is likely that the Beast Lord and the Blue Catkin that serve him will make note of you should you spread your knowledge.”

Her conjecture seemed fairly plausible. We had to be careful with who we told. The most ideal situation would be for us to spread the info through an information network inaccessible to all but Black Catkin.

[Are there like, any Black Catkin-exclusive communities we could try spreading the word to?]

“There should be several within the Beastkin’s Country. However, I highly doubt you will find anything more than a slum or village comprised solely of slaves.”

I really did want to go check out the Beastkin’s Country, but I felt it was honestly way too dangerous for it to be worth visiting.

“Are you planning to visit it? I believe you did make mention of there being a God-tier Blacksmith.”

[Nah. It’s not worth the risk.]

“But might learn more about Master.”

[Doesn’t matter. There’s only a chance the blacksmith’ll be able to tell me anything about me. I can’t really see taking that chance to be even remotely worth the amount of danger going there’ll put you in.]

“But!”

[It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. We’ll get our hands on more clues about my identity eventually, and I’m pretty sure there are better ways for us to tell other Black Catkin about what they need to do in order to evolve.]

“Nn...”

Again, I really did want to pay the place a visit, but it just wasn’t worth it.



Or at least that was what I’d thought at the time. My opinion changed when we learned that the Beast Lord was in fact working to the Black Cat Tribe’s benefit. That is, he was eliminating Blue Catkin groups and releasing any enslaved Black Catkin he came across.

One could almost say that he might as well have been raised by a Black Catkin.

We later went on to tell Rumina about what’d happened to Kiara.

It seemed she’d really been lamenting what she’d thought to be Kiara’s fate, as hearing the news caused her to immediately break down into tears. She clung to Fran, who’d been patting her on the shoulder, and silently sobbed into the younger girl’s perfectly flat chest.

Several minutes passed before she finally stood back up, her face red as a tomato.

“I apologize, I was simply overcome with emotion.”

[Well, least it seemed to be a positive emotion.]

“The information you provided me was truly the most wonderful news I have ever heard, and for that, I thank you.”

Rumina obviously wasn’t over the fact that she’d failed to stop the Beast Lord 500 years prior, but she’d at least managed to get that whole Kiara thing off her shoulders. Thanks to that, she managed draw out a happy smile.

“Does the Beast Lord’s alignment perhaps denote that you are now capable of disseminating information regarding the Black Cat Tribe’s evolutionary methods?”

“Nn.”

The truth of the matter was that we’d actually long told Aurel what we’d learned. I hadn’t actually been all that willing to tell him because I feared the gods and their wrath. Fran, however, wasn’t able to help herself and ended up spilling the beans.

As a result, I’d basically spent the entire conversation worrying whether or not the Goddess of Chaos would suddenly show up and throw a shitstorm.

I valued Fran’s safety over all else, but she didn’t feel the same. She valued her tribe much more than her life, and so, I didn’t end up being able to stop her.

Fortunately, the gods hadn’t deemed our actions as ones befitting any sort of retribution and hadn’t shown up.

In fact, the meeting had turned out to be a beneficial one, as Aurel had promised to help us spread the word by making use of the beastkin’s information network. It looked like all this continent’s beastkin would end up learning the truth if all went well.

“And I presume your newfound knowledge has changed your opinion of whether you wish to visit the Beastkin’s Country?”

[Pretty much. All we have to do now is try figuring out whether or not the Beast Lord knows anything about the God-tier Blacksmith we’re looking for.]

I was expecting him to know exactly who we were talking about, but you could never really be too sure given that God-tier Blacksmiths were more or less living legends. It was possible that the person we happened to be looking for had holed themselves up somewhere far away from society.

“It appears that you have no choice but to win the first three rounds through any means possible.”

“Leave to me. Will win and ask lots about Kiara and Black Cat Tribe. Will also get permission to visit Beastkin’s Country.”

“Would you be willing to deliver to Kiara a souvenir on my behalf?”

“Leave to me.”

[Consider it done.]

It seemed we'd pretty much become dead set on heading over to the Beastkin's Country, with our only blocker being that we needed to win the third round.

I was pretty confident that the goal we'd set was one we'd be able to accomplish. We'd experimented quite a bit with Awakening over the course of the past few days, and in doing so, learned just how powerful a tool it could be.

A huge chunk of the data we'd collected was data that related to Fran's Brilliant Lightning Rush.

It had risks that Rumina had made sure to make us aware of, but its payoffs made it a ridiculously good skill nonetheless. It gave us such a huge boost to speed that it allowed us to compete with A rankers.

The Black Lightning that enveloped Fran's body was ridiculously powerful as well. The sheer amount of destruction it wrought was nothing short of absurd, it could bring a High Ogre to the verge of death with just a single tap. Moreover, it also possessed the ability to pierce through armour and anything else that functioned to a similar effect. Lightning was already an element that centered around the negation of one's defenses, as it would remain perfectly effective in the face of metals and other conductive materials. The Black Lightning took that concept a step further and allowed us to almost completely ignore the tough skin that some magic beasts tended to have. Both these bonuses were passive and applied to all Fran's attacks unless we made the conscious decision to negate them.

Using the ability would slowly eat away at Fran's health and mana, but the costs were, in my opinion, effectively insignificant. The firepower it brought was so immense that it rendered me unable to even imagine a foe capable of tanking her attacks head on.

Conferring with Rumina also allowed us to figure out which skills we'd be best off leveling.

“Will at least try to win third round.”

[But it goes without saying that our goal is of course...]

“Victory!”

[Hell yeah! Let’s win this shit and then visit Kiara with our heads held hella high!]

“Nn!”

Chapter 208

Vs Goldalfa — After

We were called over to the VIP area in which the Beast Lord was situated shortly after we defeated Goldalfa. We could've actually just refused him, but Fran ended up consenting to the offer because she was offered food.

"There you are."

"Nn. Wanted to see me?"

"Well yeah, I mean you're one of them legendary Black Heavenly Tigerkin, ain't ya? No way I wouldn't want to check you out after figuring out all that."

The Beast Lord carefully observed Fran as he spoke, an action that ultimately led him to furrow his brow in confusion.

"Yeah, I don't get it, I'm not really seeing it... At first I thought it was just 'cause you were a bit too far away for me to really tell..."

"I feel the same. She seems just like any other Black Catkin to me."

The Evolution Concealment skill seemed to be capable of doing one hell of a fine job, as neither Roche nor the Beast Lord could actually tell that Fran had evolved. Both were left in a state of confusion due to the discrepancy between their current impression of her and what they'd witnessed earlier.

"Mind me asking how the hell you've managed to cover it up like that?"

"Your Majesty! Asking a question like that is not only rude, but also a breach of her privacy!"

"O-Oh come on..."

The Beast Lord seemed extremely curious because he couldn't figure out exactly what

the hell was going on. That said, I wasn't really planning to let him in the loop. I figured that telling him would probably end up causing us more trouble than it was worth further down the line and that it'd be better for us to refrain from doing so.

Fran, however, disagreed.

"Willing to tell."

[W-Wait, Fran, hold up!]

(Got an idea.)

[Care to share?]

(Just leave to me.)

[You uh... sure?]

(No issues.)

Fran seemed to be insisting that she knew what she was doing, so I ended up yielding and allowing her to do whatever it was she'd thought up.

"But only under certain condition."

"Oh? What kinda condition?"

"Looking for God-tier Blacksmith. Will tell if told blacksmith's location."

Her idea was a pretty good one. The God-tier Blacksmith's location was something extremely valuable, and thus, most likely confidential. In other words, it was unlikely that the Beast Lord would be willing to tell it to Fran under normal circumstances even if he was looking out for the Black Cat Tribe and its members.

His personality seemed to indicate that the opposite was quite possible as well, but one could never really know for sure. Plus, having a bargaining chip was pretty much always better than not.

(Master, activate Principle of Falsehood.)

[Roger that.]

The best part about the idea Fran came up with was that it allowed us to gain at least some information regardless of whether or not the Beast Lord lied. All he needed to do was assent and we had ourselves some profit.

“Agree?”

“...I will leave this decision entirely up to you, Your Majesty.”

“Oh hell no, you’re not getting out of this! You think about it too unless you want Royce on our asses for making another dumb decision.”

The Beast Lord ended up deciding to tell us what he knew after discussing it a bit with Roche.

“...Close in a bit.”

“Nn.”

The Beast Lord used his fingers to gesture at Fran in order to tell her to approach him, an act that clearly indicated that he not only knew about the blacksmith in question, but also wanted as few people to hear what he was going to say as possible.

“I’mma just flat out say that the Beastkin’s Country’s got one.”

He whispered right into Fran’s ear. His lips were so close to her that even I started to feel a bit uncomfortable. I felt the urge to chop the filthy things off if they so much as touched Fran.

“Really?”

Fran responded to him as I entertained a rather violent thought.

“Really, but the dude you’re looking for is a moody little bastard. He’s real hard to deal with, and I can’t really say whether or not he’d even be willing to see you.”^[1]

“Still okay as long as told location.”

“He’s the type of guy that doesn’t really hold much respect for authority. He basically doesn’t even care that I’m a king. I’ll still write you a letter so he knows I sent you, but just be warned that it might not really make a difference.”

“Really? Big favour.”

“Yeah, it’s whatever. Now tell me that thing I’ve been curious about.”

“Nn. Got it.”

Hearing about the Evolution Concealment skill caused the Beast Lord to start brooding.

He and Roche had even started debating whether or not it was something that Black Heavenly Tigerkin would learn upon evolution.

(Master?)

[He was telling you the truth. He not only knows where the guy is, but also plans on introducing you to him.]

(Then will need to go to Beastkin’s Country.)

[Sure seems like it.]

Fran went silent because she’d started conversing with me telepathically. The two other beastkin, however, took this as a sign that they’d accidentally left her out of the conversation because they were too focused on their own devices. Thus, Roche ended up apologizing.

“Sorry about that. We will be leaving it at that for now. Thank you once again for providing us with a valuable piece of information.”

“Nn.”

It seemed like there was a good chance they’d want to ask us for more details after the tourney came to an end.

“I would like you to have these, though not necessarily as an expression of gratitude.”

“Purpose?”

Roche handed Fran a pair of tickets.

“These tickets will allow you access to reserved seating. I believe you wish to watch the remaining matches, correct?”

“S’cause you’ve already made a name for yourself. Everyone’ll probably recognize you immediately if you go sit with everyone else, and that’d just be a huge pain in the ass.”

“And that is why we would like for you to have those tickets. The reserved seats are located a fair distance away from the regular seats, and the individuals that have the rights to them are far more polite. Sitting over there will assist you in keeping out of trouble.”

“Thanks. Why two?”

“The other one’s for that familiar of yours, the one that had Gold all distracted and shit.”

“His Majesty immediately declared that he wished for your wolf to be seated after seeing it. Obtaining the second ticket was quite the task.”

“Sorry.”

“Please, do not worry about it. My troubles were entirely the result of His Majesty’s high-handedness.”

“Oh come on man, what the hell? You’re making it look like it’s all my fault.”

“How is it not? Oh well, I do not particularly mind as your actions did not result in any harm. You will, however, have to deal with Sir Solbard later on.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know already.”

Urushi’s ticket had apparently belonged to a noble from the Beastkin’s Country. Said noble had been visiting on his own as opposed to as a member of the Beast Lord’s

party. However, the Beast Lord had basically forced the man to sell his ticket regardless.

He'd made up for it by inviting the man over to the VIP section, a result the person in question was actually quite happy with given that he was basically handed a chance to build a better relationship with the Beast Lord.

"We had originally secured a single ticket as we had suspected that you would likely not want to remain in the VIP area."

"Nn."

The atmosphere in here was a bit stiff, and more importantly, Fran herself wasn't really able to relax. She'd yet to be able to let her guard down around the Beast Lord and his companions.

Fran got ready to leave the VIP area with a huge platter of the food she'd taken from it in tow right about when the noble Roche had mentioned approached it.

She'd offered to pay for what she was going to eat, but the Beast Lord ended up dismissing the notion and calling the platter a reward she'd earned given that she'd beat Goldalfa. And so, we ended up leisurely getting ourselves ready to watch the matches to come.



The reserved seating area was full of nobles and other people with a tonne of spare cash. A bunch of them spotted us immediately, but they didn't end up saying anything, quite possibly because they were afraid of us. Or rather, of Urushi.

He still seemed to be still feeling the rush he'd gotten from the super intense battle we'd just fought, as his face had a bit of a wilder look on it than usual. Honestly speaking, it was a bit terrifying to look at. I didn't really bother asking him to fix it because it kept people away, and all in all, ended up functioning as a convenience.

[So the next match still hasn't started yet?]

"Nn."

“Woof.”

We’d kinda destroyed the arena. The staff had to repair it before the next match began.

I’d considered the possibility that they’d have like a reigning champion or something carry in a giant ass ring into the arena, but that wasn’t what’d actually happened. They were instead fixing everything through the application of Earth Magic. To that end, the person responsible for the repairs was currently drawing some sort of magic circle.



It took about twenty minutes for them to create an entirely new arena and bring in the next pair of contestants.

Today’s second match was between Amanda and Erza. I honestly wasn’t sure which of the two we were supposed to be rooting for.

Their battle began before I was actually able to make up my mind.

Amanda began moving around the Arena and attacking with her whip while Erza stayed centered around the same area while waiting for a chance to throw a counterattack.

I couldn’t help but enjoy spectating the two of them as they fought. One’s whip was raging within the barrier’s confines as would a dragon, while the other’s mace was cleaving holes in the arena every single time it was swung. There was but only one issue...

“Ahhhhh...!”

“Iwwaaaaahhh!”

That one issue was the fact that the buff manwoman would moan each and every time he was struck with the whip. I couldn’t help but begin debating whether or not Fran was actually old enough to be watching the two go at each other.

I felt like I most likely would’ve directed her attention elsewhere and disallowed her from watching if we weren’t going to end up fighting the winner.

I expected the match to last quite a while given that Erza had both high defenses and the Pain Conversion skill, but I was wrong.

“Ahuuunnn!”

“It’s over!”

“Ahhh... Haaaahhhnnn!”

Amanda swung her whip in a downwards arc and sent Erza flying. He’d passed out by the time he landed, which made sense.

Not feeling pain was useful and all, but one would still eventually lose consciousness and control over one’s body should one take way too much damage.

“I can’t believe it! Erza, Ulmutt’s Hero, was defeated with ease! Well, that’s an A ranked adventurer for you! This round goes to Amanda of Hariti!”

I was surprised to hear the caster openly declare *that* as the city’s hero. It seemed that Ulmutt’s people were a lot more accepting than I’d been giving them credit for.

[Did you manage to catch that last attack of hers...?]

“Barely?”

[Yeah, same here.]

Amanda’s whip moved so quickly that I hadn’t even been able to fully keep track of it from afar. Fran and I were both starting to worry that we wouldn’t be able to repel her attacks.

[Looks like our next match is going to be one hell of a tough one.]

“Nn!”

[1] Assuming male, but gender is not stated. Japanese can do that without it sounding out of place, awkward, or even really intentional.

Chapter 209

Finally, Amanda

Not much time had passed since Amanda and Erza finished up their duel.

The arena was still in the midst of being repaired, so the next match had yet to start. Fran didn't really have much to do, so she ended up munching on a bunch of skewers as she looked over the tournament's brackets.

"Next, Forrund versus Phillip."

[I'm pretty sure Forrund'll end up winning.]

We'd seen both of them in combat before, and as a result, more or less ended up coming to the conclusion that Forrund was just as monstrously strong as Amanda.

[Let's hope Phillip manages to hold on and draw out a couple of Forrund's cards so we can figure out what he's got up his sleeve.]

"Nn. Wishing Phillip luck."

Giving Phillip our blessings turned out to be completely pointless, as he'd ended up losing almost instantly.

Despite that, he was satisfied because he'd more or less fulfilled his goal by taking a few seconds to inform the audience of Barbra's plight and requesting their aid before the match began. Namely, his voice had reached all the nobles that'd finally decided to start spectating because it'd come time for the quarter finals.

The day's fourth and last match pit Royce, one of the Beast Lord's guards, against Fermus, the Dragon's Table's owner. Their battle ended up being far more intense than I'd initially been expecting.

Royce's strategy made heavy use of his ability to teleport both with and without his Dimensional Gate. He combined his ridiculous magic-based mobility with the natural

agility that most Rabbitkin just happened to have in order to outmaneuver his foe while attacking with Earth-based spells. I couldn't help but feel a bit frustrated at the fact that he was clearly better at teleporting than I was. He would also make occasional use of Moonlight Magic in order to reflect his opponent's attacks. His ability to make it seem like he could do it without exerting much effort made him appear ridiculously difficult to deal with.

Royce's fighting style was incredibly impressive, but Fermus' completely trumped it in terms of how much it shocked me.

General Information

Name: Fermus

Age: 63

Species: Human

Class: Magic Threadmaster

State: Normal

Status Level: 68/99

HP: 436

MP: 669

STR: 231

VIT: 201

AGI: 412

INT: 327

MGC: 339

DEX: 681

Skills

Espionage: Lv 5

Dismantling: Lv 8

Flame Resistance: Lv 8

Wind Magic: Lv 3

Crisis Detection: Lv 8

Presence Detection: Lv 6

Steel Thread Techniques: MAX

Steel Thread Arts: MAX

Bind: Lv 7

Harvesting: Lv 6
Muffle: Lv 6
Resistance To Abnormal Status Conditions: Lv 6
Commerce: Lv 5
Vibration Perception: Lv 8
Vibration Strike: Lv 6
Twin Sword Arts: Lv 8
Thread Manipulation: MAX
Short Sword Arts: Lv 3
Throwing: Lv 9
Lasso: Lv 4
Magical Thread Creation: Lv 7
Knowledge of Magic Beasts: Lv 3
Magic Perception: Lv 5
Water Magic: Lv 6
Cooking: Lv 8
Trap Disarming: Lv 5
Trap Detection: Lv 5
Trap Creation: Lv 8
Reinforced Threads
Orc Killer
Vigour Manipulation
Nulled Sense of Pain
Thought Division
Magic Manipulation

Innate Skills

Threading

Unique skills

Dragon Genocider

Titles

Natural Enemy of Scaled Beings

User of Steel Threads

Orc Killer

Dungeon Conqueror

Dragon Genocider

Magic Thread User

Equipment

Monarch Whale's Beard War Threads

Dragon-Eating Spider's War Threads

Lighting Dragonfang Shortsword

Imperial Wrath Armour ^[1]

Dragon Wing Mantle

Ring of Poison Nullification

Deodorizing Earing

Looking at his status page told me he used threads and all that, but completely failed to inform me as to just how versatile he could be. I'd only been expecting him to be able to use about ten threads simultaneously, but I was way off the mark. His ability to manipulate magical energy freed him from the one per finger limit and made it so he could control over 100 at once.

Fermus' weapons would take on many forms as they chased Royce around the arena. They'd become swords, walls, and nets upon his command. He also had a bunch of his threads strewn around the arena. They were placed in such a way that they were capable of functioning kind of like alarm system, one that prevented him from losing track of Royce regardless of where the rabbitkin ended up teleporting.

It went without saying that Fermus was still taking a fair bit of damage. His threads were extremely powerful, but they weren't capable of stopping the massive rocks Royce would hurl his way. He'd also occasionally tank a few hits when Royce engaged him in close combat, as the rabbitkin was definitely the better of the two when it came to that particular aspect.

Despite that, Royce wasn't able to tilt the match in his favour. The arena was far too small. It prevented him from escaping Fermus' range, so he eventually ended up getting caught in and ripped apart by the older man's weapons.

"And the winner is Fermus, The Dragon Hunter! His strength has yet to fade despite retiring from adventuring! That's someone that's had their name in the records for three years in a row for you!"

Fermus bowed elegantly as he waved to the crowd, a set of actions that probably

would've seemed conceited had he not looked nearly as accustomed to them.

[He sure seems strong.]

"Nn."

[Hmmm... I'm not really all that sure how we're supposed to handle him given how little room there is inside the barrier.]

And with that, the quarter finals ended up coming to an end.

Tomorrow's two matches would be Fran vs Amanda and Forrund vs Fermus.

[Well, looks like we're going up against Amanda.]

My guess was that she probably wasn't going to be holding back given how she'd acted back when she sparred with Fran. If anything, she seemed more like the type of person to do the exact opposite and go all out in order to demonstrate her respect.

Man, I never would've thought that we'd have a chance to duel Amanda with both us and her going all out. She was the same rank as the foe we'd just defeated, but I honestly wasn't all that confident that we could actually beat her. To me, she was pretty much an avatar of strength, quite possibly because we'd been pretty weak back when we'd first met her.

"Will still win?"

[Yeah, I know. We can't let ourselves be stopped here if we actually want to win this whole damn tourney.]

"Nn!"

"Woof woof!"

The way Urushi barked almost made him seem like he wanted to make sure we hadn't forgotten about him.

"Urushi, do best too."

All of the day's matches had ended, so many of the other spectators began leaving as we thought things through.

[We should probably leave too.]

“Nn. Will go visit Erza.”

[Right. Yeah, we should.]

He'd really helped us a whole bunch, so I figured we might as well pay him a visit and attempt to cheer him up seeing as how he'd ended up losing, and in a pretty showy way at that.

We headed over to his room in the sickbay after asking a nearby clerk about his whereabouts. There, we found him sleeping atop a bed, still unconscious.

I realized after we got a bit closer that his expression was actually a rather happy one.

“Ahhhhnnn... Mfhmmmmm...”

He tossed and turned towards us and revealed that the expression on his face was in fact a lewd one.

“Ughhhnnnnnn... Kufufu...”

Bits of drool were dripping from the slovenly smile that decorated his face. I honestly couldn't tell whether or not he was actually feeling down.

[You doing okay there Fran? Not feeling disgusted or anything?]

“Why?”

[Uhhh, don't worry 'bout it. All that matters is that you're feeling fine.]

“What do? Wake up?”

[Well, he seems like he's fine from an emotional standpoint, so we could kinda just leave him be.]

“Got it.”

And so, we ended up doing exactly that. We left Erza as is and made our way home.



The night came and went; the semi-finals quickly came upon us.

“Get ready people, cause the semi-finals are about to begin! Today’s first match is going to be one of the rarer ones, a duel between women!”

Fran was greeted by a series of cheers louder than the usual ones as she stepped onto the stage.

“This match’s winner will have the chance to move onto the finals. The loser’ll instead have to compete for third place!”

We were already all buffed up, and Fran was even in her awakened state. She could maintain the state for about an hour so long as she didn’t cast Brilliant Lightning Rush, so there wasn’t any issue with having her use the skill prior to the match’s start.

“In one corner we have the C ranked adventurer that’s taken the tournament by storm and even managed to take down an A ranker with her absurd skills! I present to you Fran, The Magic Sword Girl! Actually, scratch that. From here on out, let’s call her Fran, the Black Lightning Princess!”

Oh shit, the Black Lightning Princess? Now that’s one hell of an awesome nickname. Good job caster dude!

“Her opponent will be an A ranker that’s done nothing but put on a show of overwhelming strength time and time again, a woman whose beauty has put her well ahead of Hundred Blade Forrund in terms of popularity. Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome one of our country’s mightiest and most famous, Amanda of Hariti!”

As one could expect, more people cheered for Amanda than they did for Fran. The only reason that the we had ended with more cheers than Goldalfa last round was because most people would prefer choosing cute girls over beast-like men.

The innate beauty that came with Amanda’s half-elf blood was not something to be

underestimated. It'd even caused a decent portion of the women in the crowd had even begun referring to her as their "elder sister" as they cheered her on. [2]

"Hey Fran. I never thought we would end up having to face off against each other like this."

"Feeling same way."

"I won't be holding back!"

"Nn!"

Both fighters flashed each other fearless smiles as they drew their weapons and readied themselves for battle. Though their smiles appeared rather sweet, they were in fact attempting to intimidate each other. Under the surface, the two had already long devolved into nothing but a pair of carnivorous beasts.

[1] Imperial wrath is a term associated with dragons because Dragons are often considered to be super high tier beings in asian mythology. Interestingly enough, this term is translated as "outrage" in Pokemon. Definitely one of their better translations.

[2] This is what lesbians do in Japanese media.

Chapter 210

Side: Amanda

Watching Fran fight Goldalfa left me in a state of shock. She had become far stronger than I had imagined.

Fran had always been both strong and cute. That, I knew from the moment we first met. I had also known that she would eventually grow if given enough time.

I knew that she would one day surpass me, but I had always thought that day was one that wouldn't come for another 10 years.

I had predicted that she would lose her quarter-final match, but she didn't. She defeated Goldalfa, a foe that I would have had to struggle against.

Her rate of growth was so high it could only be deemed abnormal. It was likely one brought about by her desire to evolve, and made possible by Master, her mysterious sword. I had no doubt that it was he that guided her along.

Speaking of which, it seemed that Master had also grown considerably more powerful. He had performed several surprising feats as Fran dueled Goldalfa, feats that simply could not possibly be attributed to Fran herself. Specifically, I believed it was likely that he was responsible for using the instances in which the Fran had seemingly used Space Time Magic and Lightning Magic chantlessly in rapid succession. Likewise, I also assumed that he was the catalyst that had allowed her to evolve, to do what was considered unthinkable for the Black Cat Tribe's members.

I was unable to tell exactly which abilities could be attributed to Fran, and which could be attributed to Master, but I did know that they would make for a difficult opponent with their powers combined.

They were not to be underestimated, even in the slightest.

The most surprising part of the battle was when they used Physical Damage Nullification. I was only able to recognize the skill because I had once experienced

fighting against a foe that happened to have it. Their ability to stop Goldalfa's axe head on and block his powerful shockwave-based attacks with nothing but an outstretched arm served to evidence that they either had the skill or one in its vein.

Physical Damage Nullification was powerful and difficult to deal with, but it still did have its flaws. Its high mana consumption meant I could eventually break through her defenses so long as I continued to attack.

"That girl has quite the strength to her. Is she perhaps some sort of adventurer?"

"I highly doubt that conjecture of yours. She appears to be a Beastkin, and is therefore most likely associated with the Beastkin's Country."

"I really would prefer if she was to affiliate herself with us given her strength."

"Well, I shan't be allowing to steal a march on me."

"She has quite the number of applications if you take her beauty into consideration."

"Uhyohyo, I would like to take her under my own wing as well."

The nobles in my vicinity did as they inevitably would have, and began to make note of her. Fran's tender age had led them to believe that she was prone to listen to their commands regardless of what they were.

"I would love for her to join the ranks of my imperial guests."

"She would make a perfect guard for my daughter."

I felt the urge to administer a tad bit of discipline, but stopped as I heard several more legitimate ideas arise. I was unable to determine which course of action would be better, and instead ended up once again pondering about her growth.

I had been acquainted with Fran for a long time. We met far before we encountered one another in Alessa. In fact, I was first introduced to her over ten years ago.

But in truth, our relationship was far more deeply rooted than even that.

I had long been acquainted with her parents. They were alumni from one of the

orphanages I ran. Her parents' names were Kinan and Framia. I still remembered looking after the two of them in their youth.

They grew up, left the orphanage after getting into an argument with me, and took up adventuring.

We had said our goodbyes on the wrong foot, so I was glad they decided to visit.

It had all been my fault in the first place. Adventuring had not struck me as their forte. The only fate I could imagine befalling them was death, so I denied their dreams. I told them that they would be unable to evolve even if they tried. My criticisms had been too remorseless, and because of that, I failed in preventing the two from taking off.

I had failed in communicating to them. There was likely a better way for me to go about giving them advice. That was why I was really happy that they purposefully sought me out and had me meet their newborn daughter.

They told me that her name was Fran. Both her name, age, and species matched that of the young adventurer I met in Alessa.

But even so, I was unable to discern her identity when I first heard of her. The reason for that was because I had caught wind of both Kinan's and Framia's deaths. Though there was never any word of Fran's fate, I assumed she had followed in their footsteps.

Meeting her and seeing her face, however, changed everything. She looked just like Framia had in her childhood, and so, I put two and two together.

I wanted to immediately let her know that I was acquainted with her parents. I wanted to take her under my care, but that decision was one I hesitated to make. She had already proved herself to be an accomplished adventurer, and more importantly, I had already proven unable to protect her parents and prevent them from meeting their demises.

After a bit of consideration, I decided not to mention the bonds we shared, and instead thought of a different method by which I could offer her protection. That was why I forced my way into her quest and sparred with her, so I could do my utmost to ensure her safety. I was certain that Fran would one day become an adventurer important enough to leave her name in history.

What I was worried about was that she would one day overestimate herself and have the rug swept out from right under her feet.

I wanted to teach her that thinking of oneself as the pinnacle of strength was foolhardy, that there was always someone or something stronger than oneself. I wanted to show her what it was like to face off against a foe far mightier than herself.

To that end, I spent several months immersed in bettering myself. In doing so, I raised the level of my Whip Techniques skill for the first time in around 10 years. I was only 50 years old, so I was still young, but the combination of my elven blood and a more relaxed lifestyle had caused my skill levels to plateau. However, many of them once again began to grow as I trained with a goal in mind.

My actions once again allowed me to affirm that goals were important, and that they encouraged achieving results.

I finally obtained the Celestial Whipmaster class I had always wanted, all so I could defeat Fran.



Fran and I faced each other the next day.

She wore a wonderful smile as she readied herself for battle. She was neither afraid of me nor nervous. I could tell that she had directed her entire focus on victory and nothing more.

I knew that I was going to have to push myself if I wanted to win. Yesterday's observations had led me to understand that Fran had already not only surpassed me in terms of speed, but also had enough firepower to slay me in but a single blow.

That was simply how much strength her evolution had provided her.

And it was also the precise reason for which I had to win. I had to more than just win. I had to overwhelm her and prove to her that she should refrain from letting her guard down, and I had to be ready to make any and all sacrifices necessary to make that possible.

Fran and Master unleashed several spells the moment the match began.

The precise combination was one of wind and lightning. It seemed that the former was used to prevent me from using my whip, and the latter to paralyze me.

It was clear that they were using their heads, but the spells they had casted were far too weak to stop me in my tracks. I fought back by concentrating and releasing a mass of magical energy in order to execute my fastest and most powerful technique, one that completely blew their spells away.

“Call of the End — Vaisravana’s Downfall!”

My whip raged through the stadium at a speed not even I could perceive.

It blew Fran’s magic away and began assaulting her.

My assault proved that Fran had the Physical Damage Nullification skill. Each of the attacks assailing her were powerful enough to turn a High Ogre into mincemeat, but she was not taking any sort of visible damage whatsoever.

Still, I continued flaying my whip. I could tell my attacks were draining Fran’s mana. I had to press on until she ran out.

My divine whip technique’s high power was both its greatest strength and weakness. My whip would be destroyed if I kept up the barrage for far too long.

The whip I was currently using was one I had for many years, and one I had come to love, but I continued to press on regardless. There was no point in worrying about my weapon lasting me through to the final round. My true purpose was to win this match. Instilling a sense of humility in Fran was the one thing that really mattered.

“Here she comes.”

Fran vanished. I knew she had teleported through the use of Space/Time Magic, and because I knew, I was able to react to her attack.

I moved as quickly as I could and got away from my prior position. Fran appeared where I had been moments before, her face full of surprise.

Still, she didn’t give up.

She combined her skills and spells in order to accelerate at a rate far outside my expectations, an act that in and of itself, was exactly what I expected from her.

“Haaaahhh!”

Fran put me in a bad spot. She not only activated my Spirit’s Grace skill, but had also forced me in her preferred range. Her black lightning cloaked blade flew right at me once again. It was an attack I highly doubted I was capable of dodging.

Chapter 211

Vs Amanda — Finale

Both Fran and Amanda began giving off an aura of battlelust as they stared each other down.

I appraised Amanda and reaffirmed that she was a versatile fighter capable of adapting to any sort of situation. She totally trumped us in terms of how experienced she was, but our weapon-related skills were at a higher level than hers, so it wasn't like we were at a complete disadvantage. I was confident we'd be able to use our Sword Lord Arts to find an opening we could make use of.

General Information

Name: Amanda

Age: 58

Species: Half-Elf

Class: Celestial Whipmaster ^[0]

State: Normal

Status Level: 71

HP: 651

MP: 808

STR: 330

VIT: 298

AGI: 457

INT: 383

MGC: 406

DEX: 359

Skills

Intimidation: Lv 7

Chant Shortening: Lv 6

Espionage: Lv 8

Dismantling: Lv 8
Flame Resistance: Lv 6
Bare Handed Combat Techniques: Lv 4
Bare Handed Combat Arts: Lv 7
Wind Magic: MAX
Crisis Perception: Lv 9
Presence Detection: Lv 8
Herculean Strength: Lv 5
Mining: Lv 7
Harvesting: Lv 8
Blink: MAX
Blink Step: Lv 7
Drowsiness Resistance: Lv 6
Elemental Blade: Lv 7
Throwing: Lv 8
Poison Resistance: Lv 6
Ice/Snow Resistance: Lv 5
Whip Techniques: MAX
Divine Whip Techniques: Lv 4
Whip Arts: MAX
Divine Whip Arts: Lv 6
Storm Magic: Lv 5
Paralysis Resistance: Lv 8
Magic Perception: Lv 5
Lightning Resistance: Lv 7
Orc Killer
Vigour Manipulation
Giant Slayer
Bodily Reinforcement
Demon Slayer
Dragon Killer
Greater Agility Boost
Storm Element Reinforcement
Magic Manipulation
Whip Reinforcement

Innate Skills

Heavenly Whip Techniques

Unique Skills

Spirit's Grace

Titles

Orc Killer

One Who Protects Children

Giant Slayer

Dungeon Conqueror

Demon Slayer

Dragon Killer

One who is Like a Storm

User of Wind

Magic Beast Annihilator

A Ranked Adventurer

Equipment

Heavenly Dragon's Beard Whip

Ancient Multi Headed Snake's Leather Armour

Magic Poisonous Lizard's Mantle

Magic Eyed Monarch Cow's Boots

Heavenly Wheel of Substitution ^[1]

Lightning Bird's Decorative Feathers

Bulwark Bracelet

Magic Numbing Owl's Feather Shuriken x 24

Amanda had gone through a few changes. Her class had switched from Stormfighter to Celestial Whipmaster, and her whip-related skills were now a bit higher leveled than they were before. She had also gotten her hands on an interesting looking innate skill.

I couldn't help but feel like she'd gone out of her way to switch classes and better herself just so she could improve her chances at winning the tournament.

Heavenly Whip Techniques: Increases the speed of one's whip techniques in exchange for increased resource expenditure.

I couldn't really tell just how fast her new class and its accompanying skill made her. But either way, it seemed like an extremely powerful one given the way its name was phrased. However, its increased resource consumption implied that it couldn't be used multiple times in rapid succession, which in turn meant it would leave her with openings we could use against her.

"Match start!"

The caster responded to the two combatants pulling out their weapons by signaling for them to continue.

We immediately fired off several different spells the moment the match began.

"Hexagonal Tornado!"

[Thunderbolt!]

[Thunder Chain!]

[Tornado Lance!]

We used two kinds of spells, with each playing its own unique function. Our lightning based spells were used to stun Amanda herself; we wanted to afflict her with paralysis so we could restrict her movements. The wind-based spells, on the other hand, were meant to restrict her whip and make it more difficult for her to react to our movements.

Rumina had explained to us that the Black Heavenly Tigerkin was in fact a specialized race, one that was best able to demonstrate its prowess in battle by casting Lightning Magic mid combat. Learning that caused me immediately choose to max the skill out, which in turn allowed me to get my hands on the Lightning enhancement skill as a bit of an added bonus.

One of the more spamable and easier to use skills we'd gotten our hands on was Thunderbolt. It was quick to cast, and would continue to zap any it hit even after its initial shock. You could actually say it was basically an upgraded version of Stun Bolt. The other skill we'd cast, Thunder Chain, was a skill with relatively low firepower, but served to provide decent function by restraining its target it with chains of lightning.

Amanda's unique skill, Spirit's Grace, was effectively one of the best defensive mechanisms one could possibly have. It would automatically activate and completely negate a single attack should it land. Hence, I didn't expect or even hope for the attacks we'd launched at Amanda to win the match for us. I was more so hoping that the spells would be able to pop her passive. We needed to break past her absolute defenses if we wanted to get anywhere at all.

The only other reason we'd fired the spells at her was because we wanted to slow her down and buy us some time. Our goal was to stall long enough for us to activate Brilliant Lightning Flash. Stalling and burning through both time and our limited resources was just a dumb waste of time. There was no point to it. Attempting to end the match as soon as possible was the better choice to make. Fran was much more agile than Amanda, so I was 100% sure that we'd have the advantage in close quarters combat.

Whips were weapons that had the tendency to focus on repeated hits, but Amanda's style in particular was one that focused more on single, powerful strikes. We decided to take advantage of that and immediately return fire after soaking up one of her hits. To that end, I had Physical Damage Nullification slotted in and ready to go.

Fran began concentrating her magical energy immediately after unleashing her first spell.

[Alright Fran, let's go!]

"Nn! Brilliant..."

"Call of the End — Vaisravana's Downfall!"

Amanda chanted a slew of power filled words the moment the smaller girl activated her innate skill.

"Lightning Rush!"

The spells we fired were totally blown away immediately as Amanda activated her skill. We were suddenly exposed to attacks on all sides. The whip came at us nonstop, shredded our surroundings, and turned them to dust. It was like we'd suddenly been engulfed in powerful windstorm.

“Mmph!”

[Tsk!]

The vicious strikes came at us so quickly that I couldn't even keep track of them after using Space/Time Magic and speeding up my ability to perceive. Physical Damage Nullification kept popping non-stop. Every single attack that landed was rather high damage, so our mana ended up draining really quickly.

Dodging Amanda's attack was simply out of the question. There wasn't enough space for us to get out of its range; her skill filled the entire barrier. Moreover, each swing of her whip unleashed a number of powerful but invisible shockwaves, ones that assaulted us as would the fangs of a serpent. To be more exact, the shockwaves were in fact sonic booms created by the whip breaking the sound barrier. I couldn't even begin to imagine exactly how quickly the whip was actually moving. All I knew was that it was being propelled by magical energy.

Brilliant Lightning Rush had restored our mana, but a huge chunk of it had already once again been drained away.

(Master, teleport!)

[Short Jump!]

Fran commanded me to warp us the moment she concluded that teleporting would consume fewer resources than sitting around and soaking up Amanda's attacks.

We were supposed to have teleported right behind Amanda, but she had moved over to the stage's other side before we rematerialized.

Our ability to teleport had already long been exposed. We'd used it a whole bunch, so I wasn't surprised that Amanda knew about it. Given that, it was to no surprise that she was able to use the bit of lag time before when we vanished and when we reappeared to avoid us so long as she was able to read our movements.

“Burniaaaaa!”

The exchange had caused Fran to realize that her opponent was far too powerful for her to take down if she relied on teleportation alone, so she instead used a flame spell

to accelerate herself in the older woman's direction. We had to get a hit in if we wanted to pop her passive. Shooting black lightning at her probably wouldn't cut it given how far apart we were, so we honestly had very little other choice but to charge at her

"Haaaah!"

Fran charged straight through the windstorm caused by Amanda's whip and attacked her. The half-elf didn't seem to have expected Fran to suddenly pick up so much speed, as she wasn't able to dodge the incoming slash.

We finally reached her. The strike was repelled, but we at least managed to pop her passive.

Fran took the chance presented to her, twisted my blade, and immediately followed up with a second strike.

Here we go!

Amanda's eyes opened wide in shock as I flew straight towards her.

[Haaaaaaaahhhh!]

But our slash never reached her.

Amanda's continued attacks had caused our mana to basically run dry.

[Gaaahh!]

We no longer had enough to activate Physical Damage Nullification. Likewise, we also lacked the mana to create barriers.

Half my blade turned to dust and crumbled as Fran and I were both sent flying into the barrier set up to protect the audience.

"Grfhhh!"

I almost instinctively began regenerating my blade, but immediately stopped as I realized that Fran needed my attention.

A warm liquid, Fran's blood, flowed down my blade. Its source was Fran, or more specifically, the wounds that covered her from head to toe.

[Heal!]

Shit!

I needed to tend to her right away. There was still a chance for us to pull something off so long as Fran managed to steer clear of instantly dying.

My hopes remained unanswered; Fran's body was enveloped in light as the Cradle of Time activated and restored her to her prior state.

"It's already over! The match only lasted a total of 10 seconds! What the hell just happened!? I could've sworn I saw something blow away the spells Fran had fired, but that was it! Everything that happened after was just way too quick for me to make out!"

I was confident that we would've won if we'd just managed to land that one hit, but unfortunately, we weren't. Amanda's whip had both far swifter and more powerful than I'd been expecting it to be.

"But you can still tell just how intense their duel was from the state the stadium's in! They only fought for 10 seconds, but the entire stage's been totally destroyed! You can't even tell what shape it started off with anymore!"

The caster's words were spot on. Over half the stage had been shredded to bits. Even the few parts that remained were barely recognizable given how busted up they were. Amanda's technique, the ability that'd caused all this destruction, was truly one to be feared.

"...Lost?"

[Unfortunately.]

Fran rose to her feet as she picked me up. The fact that she was unable to really fight back or accomplish much had made it so she was still in a bit of a state of confusion.

"Already?"

[Already.]

Amanda ran up to Fran as the smaller girl stared out into space.

“Are you okay Fran!?”

The half-elf seemed to be completely out of breath. Using just that one move had totally exhausted her and eaten through half her mana pool. She eventually managed to recover her breath, but as one could expect, her mana showed no signs of rejuvenating.

Despite that, she remained completely unconcerned with her own state of well being. She didn't bother to check how she was doing, as she was instead patting Fran all over while asking her if she was hurt in any which way.

Amanda really loved children. Killing Fran once the way she did had really pained her, as evidenced by the look on her face.

She wasn't able to calm down until after Fran demonstrated that she was alright by working through a few morning exercise-like motions.

“You've grown quite strong, Fran! You really had me feeling the pressure even though you've yet to catch up to me.”

“Nn.”

“However, it seems that the same can't be said for my whip.”

The move Amanda used had been so powerful that it'd caused her whip to end up getting torn accross its midsection. We weren't just talking about any other whip either. Amanda's whip was one becoming of her rank and power.

Thinking about it, it was kinda a given. I'm pretty sure my durability would plummet if Fran ended up using Amanda's technique. Every single one of those strikes of hers had enough power to totally wreck the arena, after all.

To me, her whip looked like it was flat out beyond repair. She had thought so much of Fran's strength that she'd been willing destroy her weapon in order to pull out a win.

“I saw your semifinal match. You’ve already surpassed me in how well you handle your weapon. You’re also really fast, and you can deal an incredible amount of damage with each hit. I didn’t think that it would be a good idea for me to fight you using conventional means.”

It seemed like watching just that one battle had allowed Amanda to see right through us.

“I also noticed that you had either Physical Damage Nullification or something similar to it.”

“That’s...”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to force you to tell me what it is. What I wanted to say is that my realization allowed me to understand why you had fought Colbert the way you had, and that I knew the ability weakness. Physical Damage Nullification is incredible, but it consumes a lot of magical energy. Using it non-stop will eventually run your mana dry.”

Amanda had literally figured out everything we had. She had us dancing in the palm of her hand from the very start; she’d long known that all she needed to do was kite us while waiting for us to run out of mana.

Shit!

Well, I guess it couldn’t really be helped. I shouldn’t have expected anything else from an experienced A ranker like her.

“Total loss...”

“It’s okay Fran... Chin up, alright?”

“Didn’t train enough.”

“Fran...”

Amanda started to get a bit flustered as she watched Fran squeeze my handle with a downcast gaze. She seemed to have misunderstood Fran’s actions as one’s meant to

express her disappointment.

But she was wrong.

Fran wasn't nearly that soft.

"Will definitely win next round and take third place!"

There was no denying that Fran was feeling a bit vexed that she'd lost, but she'd already moved. In fact, she'd already started reflecting on the mistakes she'd made so she could win the next battle.

Fran was positive, she always looked ahead as opposed to lamenting over the past. In that sense, one could say that her personality made her rather suited for combat.

That wasn't all there was to it either. Fran had also, in a way, derived a sort of pleasure from the duel she'd just experienced. Though she didn't think of Amanda as her master or teacher, she did at least think of her as a veritable, experienced adventurer. She was glad to know that Amanda was still stronger than her, and that she still had a cliff to surmount. And honestly, I kind of felt the same. It was nice to know that we hadn't made a mistake in viewing Amanda as a sort of target, as an incredibly strong entity we someday wanted to overcome.

"Do your best!"

"Amanda too. Win."

"Okay! It's a promise!"



Though we'd suffered quite a bit of mental exhaustion, we decided to do the usual and watch the day's second match regardless so we could learn a bit more about whoever we'd end up fighting for third place. Unlike usual, however, we ended up finding ourselves inside of a gaudy looking private room that overlooked the arena.

It was something the tournament's managers chose to provide for us the moment we asked if there were still any seats available. Amanda had wanted to join us, but she'd been dragged off to a meeting for the sake of the final round that she'd soon be

participating in.

Both Fran and I waited excitedly for the match to begin, as it was going to be one between two strong championship contenders.

Forrund and Fermus both were rather popular, but it seemed that Forrund had a bit of an advantage in that regard because he was still in active duty.

Their match, unlike ours, actually ended up dragging on for a decent chunk of time.

Fermus evaded Forrund's strikes by dodging the blades that flew at him, whereas Forrund nulled Fermus' threads by shredding them to pieces.

It looked like Fermus had the advantage, and that the he had control over the fight's momentum, but he wasn't able to bring the battle to a close.

The sword user ended up turning everything around at what seemed like the 11th hour by suddenly summoning 100 different magic swords simultaneously. He independently controlled each and every single blade and had them chase Fermus down, an action that ultimately forced the retired adventurer to yield.

[Looks like we're going to be up against Fermus.]

A wave of relief washed through me, not because I felt that we would have a better chance against Fermus, but because I was worried about Forrund's ability to copy any magic sword he touched. Specifically, I was kinda terrified of finding out what would happen if he ended up duping me.

[Our next match is going to be another tough one.]

"Powerful threads."

[Yeah. Alright, how about we make use of all the stuff we learned today so we can win tomorrow's match?]

"Nn!"

[0] Minor update to the way this class' name is phrased. The term "divine," was confusing given "Divine X Arts/Techniques," so I rephrased it to make sure it wasn't as confusing. The literal is Godly, so I used Celestial which can mean the same thing, but sounds better in a game-like fantasy setting.

[1] I don't actually know what the fuck this is. It's supposed to be a "Sky Ring," or "Heaven Ring," or something. Apparently Erza had an armour named after it, and they TL'd it as Heaven's Wheel in her case, so I'mma just use that. Googling it in Japanese didn't help either, cause it just gave me ferris wheels because the kanji is just 1 character off from how you write ferris wheel in traditional Chinese...

Chapter 212

Vs Fermus — The Battle Begins

“Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome the Martial Arts Tournament’s final set of events. The weather’s looking great today folks, it’s a perfect day to finally buckle up and watch this year’s last two matches. The first we’ll have today will be a showdown for third place!”

It seemed that today would be the last time we heard the caster and his commentary. Realizing that almost caused me to feel a sense of solitude, the same kind you’d feel as a festival you enjoyed came to a close.

(Master. Feeling off?)

[Nah, it’s just that it hadn’t really struck me that today’s the tourney’s last day.]

(Will play all cards.)

[Yeah, that we will.]

(Nn!)

Fran was unlike me in the sense that she didn’t feel even the slightest bit of lament. She was too busy being totally pumped. The young black catgirl honestly appeared to be thinking of nothing but the duel she was about to engage in.

Seeing her like that made me feel that she was extremely reliable.

“Entering from the west, we have a C ranked adventurer that’s used this tournament to make a name for herself! Fran, the Black Lightning Princess! Don’t be fooled by her, folks, ’cause she packs one hell of a punch! Her fangs are so sharp that they’ve even allowed her to take down an A ranker! Let’s hope we once again get to see her unleash that daunting black lightning of hers onto the field!”^[1]

We heard our last welcoming roar as we entered the ring. I figured that most of the

audience members present were here to see the finals, but they ended up cheering Fran on regardless.

“Mmph. Here.”

[Unfortunately, he looks like he’s in great condition today.]

Fermus walked towards the stage with a relaxed smile decorating his face. He didn’t seem even the slightest bit nervous. It was something I really should’ve seen coming given that he’d once won three of these things in a row.

(Not unfortunate.)

[Well, all’s good if that’s how you feel, I guess.]

Fran, unlike me, wished to see him in perfect form. Her nature as a battle maniac made it so she would’ve actually ended up being rather disappointed if he wasn’t.

“And from the east, Fermus, the Dragon Hunter! They say he’s retired, but, to me, it doesn’t look like his strength’s faded even in the slightest! He unfortunately lost the final round, but is definitely still going strong!”

Fermus’ gear was just as light as usual. He didn’t seem to be wearing anything more than just a white shirt and a pair of black slacks if you looked at him from afar. The dandy looking older man had a bit of a rough but professional air to him, like a butler that’d taken off his jacket and was ready to brawl. That said, his attire was actually made up of parts he’d gotten from dragons and whatnot. Looking at him more closely would allow one to tell that he was basically wearing scalemail.

“Hey, long time no see.”

“Nn.”

“Would you get mad if I told you that I never expected to have to compete with you for third place?”

“Same thought.”

“I guess the feeling is mutual then.”

I'd been expecting to fight Royce, but Fermus had proven himself the stronger of the two. I had to admit, Fermus' thread based techniques were a real threat. We didn't know how they worked, nor what he could even really do with them. Guessing at his tactics was way out of the scope of our abilities. Worst of all was that he was way more experienced than us.

Our stats were higher than his, so if we were to lose, it would definitely be due to our lack of knowledge or experience.

Fighting Amanda had proven that we weren't good enough at coming up with functional tactics, as she'd managed to completely dismantle our less than sane strategy of whipping out our trump card right off the bat.

"This match'll be one to look forward to! A young adventurer in the middle of growing stronger will be pitted against an experienced A ranker. Which of the two will come up on top!?"

"Me."

"No, it'll be me."

Fran took a stance, which soon prompted Fermus to do the same. He looked empty handed, but I knew there was no way that was actually the case. His position was undoubtedly one from which he could deploy and manipulate his string-like weapons.

General Information

Name: Monarch Whale's Beard War Threads

Attack: 100~489

MP: 500

Durability: 500

Magical Conductivity: C~A

Skills

Space/Time Element ^[2]

Flash Element

Greater Water Element

Ice/Snow Element

General Information

Name: Dragon-Eating Spider's War Threads

Attack: 55~455

MP: 300

Durability: 700

Magical Conductivity: D~B+

Skills

Flame Element

Sand Element

Greater Earth Element

Storm Element

Lava Element

Lightning Element

His threads had a huge number of elemental affinities attached to them. I wasn't really sure how they functioned, but if I had to guess, I'd assume that each individual thread could have its own element. Likewise, each individual thread seemed to have a different value for its attack and magical conductivity.

"It looks like they're ready! Without further ado, let the battle for third place... begin!"

We created a barrier and fired off several offensive spells the moment the caster signaled for us to start.

"Thunderbolt."

[Gale Hazard.]

[Blaze Wave.]

[Acid Venom.]

Immediately spamming spells wasn't something that had worked on Amanda, but I figured the tactic could still be effective against someone like Fermus.

All four of our spells were targeting Fremus' threads. We wanted the lightning-based spell to run through his threads and shock him, the fire-based spell to burn his threads down, the poison-based spell to melt them, and the wind-based spell to simply blow them away and prevent him from using them for offense.

And it worked. Our spells were able to null the first wave of attacks he'd thrown at us as the match began.

Despite that, we hadn't actually gotten any hits in, as his threads had suddenly pulsed with magical energy and dispersed our spells. The density of the mana that fluxed through his weapons was so high that I didn't even need to look to understand exactly what had happened.

It didn't seem like we'd be able to put too much pressure on him with magic alone.

[Looks like we'll have to engage him in close combat.]

"Nn."

Under normal circumstances, we would've held the advantage at a range. We could have simply continued bombarding him with magic from a couple hundred meters away until we forced him to yield. The arena, however, was far too small to allow for the aforementioned tactic. The barrier made it so we were always in reach of his threads and the ever-changing attacks he could use them to launch from any which direction.

That was why we decided to fight him up close, where it'd be a bit harder for him to manipulate his threads to his will.

We made use of the lesson Amanda and taught us and avoided using Physical Damage Nullification because we understood that Fermus was the type to deliver quick hits in rapid succession.

(First, approach.)

[Yup.]

"Brilliant Lightning Rush!"

Fran accelerated towards Fermus. He reacted by creating a wall with his threads, but was ultimately unable to stop us.

(Master! Executing plan!)

[Got it! Dimension Shift!]

[Short Jump!]

I teleported us, and this time, made the explicit assumption that we would be completely seen through. The reason I was willing to make such a move was because I'd eliminated the risk associated with it through the use of Dimension Shift, a spell that took a few seconds to activate, but could prevent all sorts of different attacks. It was more than enough to shield us from getting hit the moment we reappeared.

And that was in fact exactly what happened — a series of threads assaulted us from four different directions the moment we finished teleporting.

The application of our contingency caused them to pass right through us without doing any sort of damage.

“Hmph! I knew it. You really can use Space/Time Magic after all.”

“Haaaaahhh!”

Fran tried raising me above her head and crashing my blade into Fermus' body, but wasn't able to. He had already figured out our goal, and so, he created a barrier with his threads and stopped me in my tracks

Each individual thread was rather weak, but he was able to strengthen them and turn them into a shield by channeling magical energy through them and using a couple dozen in conjunction.

We couldn't take advantage of our higher weapon skill level because we still had absolutely no idea what Fermus' threads could do. There was just no way we could see through his techniques or predict his actions without further knowledge of his style.

[But that's fine! 'Cause we're not done just yet!]

We didn't need to have me come into contact with Fermus' flesh for us to damage him. The black lightning that enveloped Fran's body would shock whatever she attacked.

In other words, attacking Fermus' threads would cause them to be struck by lightning. The electrical energy would conduct its way through his threads and ultimately damage him.

Or at least, that's what should've happened.

"That won't work."

"Kuh!"

The black lightning did begin coursing through Fermus' threads, but it began petering out and losing its power as it moved, only to disappear completely before reaching him. He had managed to use his threads' sheer volume to disperse all the electrical energy before it reached him.

Fran continued attacking Fermus while parrying the threads he countered her with, but to no avail. None of her lightning reached him; it all dispersed and flowed into either the ground or the air instead.

He was easily handling our technique with a method we'd never imagined possible.

[Dimension Shift.]

[Short Jump.]

[Multiple Doppelganger Synthesis!]

I teleported us again, but this time, also threw in a few doppelgangers to distract him while we did. It was kinda obvious that Fermus would manage to defeat the doppelgangers in an instant, but I didn't care. What mattered was that the doppelgangers were more than just illusions. Their physical forms forced Fermus to invest time in actually dealing with them.

Watching my doppelgangers die was something that used to make me cringe, but I'd gradually gotten used to and grown completely desensitized to it over time because of all the practice we had in using them.

"Nn?"

[Huh?]

None of the three doppelgangers I spawned had taken on the form I'd been expecting them to have.

General Information

Name: Doppelganger

Attack: 100

MP: 50

Durability: 100

Magical Conductivity: C

They didn't have the form I had when I was still human, but instead, happened to possess my current form. Appearance wise, they were basically perfect replicas of me; it was impossible to tell us apart at a glance.

Fortunately, they still did their jobs; Fermus' eyes ended up getting pulled to the newly formed blades.

I was really curious as to why my doppelgangers had suddenly all turned into swords, but ended up shelving the thought for the time being. I needed to concentrate on the battle.

[Go!]

I telekinetically propelled my doppelgangers towards the dragon hunter. I hadn't planned on them actually damaging him, so I'd only put just enough force in to cause them to move towards him at the same speed they would have been at had they been free falling.

None of the replicas really had much durability, so he destroyed them in an instant. But again, they served their purpose.

We were really quite fortunate that Fermus had just fought and lost to Forrund. The experience he gained from the battle was still fresh in his mind, so he ended up paying

much more attention to the doppelgangers than was actually necessary. We'd basically slipped his mind as a result.

"Haaaaah!"

"What!?"

We took advantage of the opening and attacked him. Though Fermus managed to avoid a direct hit, he still did end up bleeding. It was a pretty good outcome considering that I'd activated Magic Poison Fang and laced the attack with venom.

The old dragon hunter had a skill that made him resistant to abnormal status conditions, but I didn't care. My goal was once again not dealing him any direct damage, but instead detracting from his ability to focus. There was no way manipulating *that* many threads didn't require an incredible amount of concentration.

Fran continued rushing him down and attacking. Shallow wounds began appearing all over him as she did.

His threads were powerful and difficult to deal with, but we were still capable of defeating him so long as we stuck cl-

[Fran, watch out!]

"Mmph!"

A piece of thread rose from beneath Fran's feet and attempted to both trap and attack her.

Fermus had lured us to one of the traps he'd prepared upon figuring out that we wanted to engage him in close combat.

I'd only barely noticed it in time for Fran to avoid a direct hit from it because of my Trap Detection skill. It was extremely difficult to pick up because of how high leveled Fermus' Trap Creation skill was. It was the type that activated if we touched one of many specific threads.

We needed to watch out and be more careful of being baited going forward.

He took the opportunity caused by us recoiling from the trap to retreat and widen the gap between us.

Holy shit! Dealing with him and his god damn threads was a huge pain in the ass!

[1] Here, the author specifically denotes that Fran's title is, in Japanese, pronounced "Kokuraiki."

[2] I literally translated the second halves of these skills for now because I'm not sure what they're supposed to do. I'll update them accordingly once the author reveals their properties.

Chapter 213

A Dragon Hunter's Essence

Fermus was giving us a lot of trouble. He had managed to ward off both our physical and magical attacks, and even made us pull out the doppelganger card. It'd caught him off guard the first time, but I wasn't expecting it to work again.

To make matters worse, we'd just discovered that Fermus was capable of creating traps with his threads mid combat. It looked like we were going to have to somehow make his threads less difficult to deal with if we wanted to be able to come out on top.

"Inferno Burst."

[Inferno Burst!]

[Inferno Burst!]

[Inferno Burst!]

We chose to cast several fire-based spells in an attempt to burn through Fermus' threads and disable them. The four massive pillars of flames merged into a single, larger blast as they closed in on and assaulted the dragon hunter. The act of concentrating several weaker spells into a single, more powerful attack was a technique I'd actually ripped from the System Announcer; I was emulating what she had done back when we fought the lich. My imitation was still far from perfect, but it was still effective enough to merit going out of my way to attempt it.

We accounted for the fact that Fermus would attempt to dampen the flames by whipping his threads against them. We didn't, however, account for him choosing to follow up the action by diving through the encroaching magical firestorm with his right arm extended.

I couldn't comprehend his actions. I knew that he'd managed to reduce the attack's power, but that didn't change the fact that we'd thrown a total of four flame spells at him. Much to my surprise, he wasn't swallowed up by the attacks. The flames had

instead dispersed as they came into contact with his fist.

Looking more closely caused me to realize that he'd actually used his threads to create a layer of protection, one that kinda resembled a glove or gauntlet. The combination of his decently high leveled Flame Resistance skill and his flame-resistant threads more or less made him impervious to our attacks.

"You are aware that they call me a dragon hunter, right? I've got what you could call perfect countermeasures to dragonbreath and anything that resembles it."

Fermus' words caused me to realize that flames we just attacked him with kinda did resemble the breath-based attacks that dragons seemed to like launching. Fermus was obviously used to fighting scaly bastards, so our spells hadn't actually ended up meaning jack shit to him.

Fire didn't seem like it would work, so we switched gears and decided to attack him with a couple wind-based spells instead.

"Wind Cutter."

[Tornado Lance.]

[Gale Hazard.]

[Hexagonal Tornado.]

Fermus once again managed to remain unharmed, this time, by weaving his threads into a web-like net that ultimately caused the spells to change their trajectories.

It took seeing him remain unharmed for me to realize that I'd made a mistake and once again launched an attack that resembled the kind a dragon would. Some dragons could create sudden gusts of wind by flapping their wings, and others could breathe out breaths based in wind as opposed to fire.

The dragon hunter's resistance to wind and fire effectively served to cripple our offenses. The only other two types of magic we had at a high enough level to damage someone as strong as him were lightning and space/time.

[Let's try hitting him with some space/time stuff first.]

Attacking with space/time magic would've sounded like a good idea if not for the fact that the element didn't actually have that many offensive spells. The only one that we could really make use of was the one called Dimensional Sword.

Given that, we decided to teleport several times in succession to close in on him before unleashing that exact spell.

Dimension Sword was a nifty little technique with its fair share of perks. It could pierce through any sort of defense and attack only its intended target. That said, it wasn't a particularly good offensive ability because its strengths came with counterbalancing weaknesses. It didn't do much damage, and was extremely difficult to use because of the way its targeting worked. That is, using it would allow one to identify a small preset zone in which it would actually function; the spell would completely fail to do anything at all if its target moved out of its area of effect by the time it activated.

Fermus was the type that seemed to sit still and intercept incoming attacks as opposed to straight up avoiding them, so I'd been fairly certain that we'd be able to hit him with it.

"I've seen that spell before. I know how it works."

"Tsk!"

Unfortunately, that didn't end up being the case. Fermus' experience allowed him to identify our tactic and immediately react with a dodge.

[Digdug!]

"I've already accounted for something like that too."

I tried digging a hole right under him in order to impede his ability to move, but he'd perfectly negated the action by spreading a net of threads underneath him and standing on top of it.

"And now, it's my turn."

"Kuh! Threads in the way."

The threads that Fermus had set up above the stage all started to warp. They twisted together and became thin spears that came flying at us from all sides.

It was an attack that was extremely problematic to deal with. There were so many sharp edges assaulting us that I didn't think we'd actually be able to keep track of them all. And that was bad, extremely bad. Fermus had laced the threads with his magical energy, so any that did actually end up hitting us would be powerful enough to sever a limb or two.

Fortunately, we managed to prevent the attacks from landing by deploying a barrier, but that didn't change the fact that we had to stay as on guard as we possibly could.

[This isn't working Fran. He hasn't been losing any threads. It looks like he can make as many as he wants so long as he has the mana for it. We need to shift gears. The longer we let this drag on, the bigger a disadvantage we'll have.]

(Nn! Got it!)

We'd already cut through, burned down, and flat out destroyed a large number of Fermus' threads, but the volume he had on hand didn't actually seem to be decreasing in any which way. I assumed that he was either using his Magic Thread Creation skill, or just abusing one of his weapons' properties. Either way, the result was the same in the sense that targeting his threads wasn't working. If anything, it seemed that our actions had only caused them to proliferate, as he could still control the ones we severed. The total number of threads within the barrier's confines had actually increased, and as a result, his attacks had started becoming more varied in nature and form.

(Master, will use lightning magic.)

[Roger that!]

I knew that Fermus could disperse our lightning based spells if he manipulated his threads to do so, but that didn't necessarily mean that they were actually ineffective. There had to be a limit to the amount of electrical energy he could handle at once. There was a chance we'd be able to totally end him if we bombarded him with spells that contained way more power than a mere Thunderbolt or two.

Black Lightning Advent was most likely capable of completely shattering his defenses,

but I didn't want to resort to it just yet. Using the skill would cause Fran to lose her awakened status, so I kinda wanted to hold onto it just in case. Moreover was the fact that it didn't actually cover that much of an area. Most of Black Lightning Advent's power was focused on its target, and its target alone.

The current circumstances seemed to indicate that we would be better off using attacks that covered a larger area.

[Thor's Hammer!]

I cast one of the spells we'd gotten the moment Lightning Magic had hit level 8. It, Thor's Hammer, was a technique that had both high power and a decent size to it. It wasn't big enough for it to be called a true AOE spell, but it at least served the purposes we needed it to given how small the arena was.

A massive magic circle spawned on top of the arena. From it descended a single, ultra thick thunderbolt. It was so powerful that it almost seemed to contain all the destructive force that one associated with the god of lightning and his mallet.

Fran was resistant to lightning, and I could just use Dimension Shift whenever, so Fermus should've been the only one to have taken any sort of damage.

But again, as hard as it was for me to believe, he didn't.

The high leveled lightning based spell had dispersed upon touching the thin layer of thread he'd erected to counter it.

"My defenses can even block a thunder dragon's attacks. Don't expect to break it that easily."

It seemed that Fermus was even capable of easily negating lightning based attacks. He'd compared our strike to a thunder dragon's, but honestly, to me, that pretty much meant nothing at all. I'd never seen any thunder dragons nor heard anything of how powerful they tended to be.

"Thousand Thread Tsunami!"

Fermus' threads almost seemed to form a massive tidal wave as they surged towards us.

There were many ways we could've gone about dealing with the attack. I immediately considered destroying it with either might or magic, but Fran had other ideas in mind.

(Go through!)

[Sure thing! Dimension Gate!]

Fermus was surprised to see us move right past his wall of thread without paying it any mind. He immediately reacted by attempting to put a bit of distance between us, but it was already too late.

“Haaah!”

Fran had already gotten right next to him and cut a gaping hole in his torso.

“Mmph?”

[He subbed his body out for a fake!]

Stuff spilled from the dragon hunter's open wound. I'd been expecting the *stuff* to be his blood and guts, but, it'd actually just been a series of strings.

The thing that we'd finally reached and cut down had been nothing but a puppet made of thread. He'd used the moment the tsunami had blocked our line of sight to create a puppet. He'd also used some sort of magic to disguise it and make it look almost exactly like him. I couldn't help but be impressed by much he'd done in so little time.

We immediately cut the threads that assaulted us and searched for Fermus' presence — only to find that he was right behind us.

We heard a whooshing sound as a few threads extended from Fermus' hands and began moving to wrap themselves around Fran's neck. There weren't that many of them, but they were sharp enough to do more than just lop her head clean off.

“Haah!”

Fran quickly ducked and avoided the vice before it decapitated her before switching to a reverse grip and thrusting me straight under her right armpit and stabbing at the

man to her rear.

“Woah!”

We caught him off guard, but he somehow managed to dodge the attack regardless by twisting his body to the side. He then followed through with the rotational movement and thrust the underside of his fist as he completed a full spin and once again sent a series of threads in Fran’s direction.

“Raaah!”

Fran cut them down and once again attacked Fermus, this time with a stab.

However, she still simply couldn’t hit him. His threads surged up from beneath her feet and bound them in order to momentarily stop her in her tracks. She probably would’ve lost her feet to the attack had our barrier not been up. The catgirl forcefully thrust me forward regardless, he narrowly managed to avoid my blade by bending backwards and moving under it as would someone doing the limbo.

It was a perfect dodge, but also an act that exposed him to damage. Fran twisted me around and immediately cleaved at his now open backside.

The moment he got hit, his body had started doing things that I could only gauge as physically impossible. I was sure that he hadn’t put any power into his limbs or anything like that, but he somehow just started moving off to the right. The acceleration was sudden, and almost seemed to come out of nowhere.

I had to take a second look to realize that he’d wrapped several threads around his own body and used them to drag it off to the side.

[It looks like we’ve finally got a confirmed hit in.]

“Nn!”

We hadn’t managed to bisect him in a single strike, but we’d at least worked our way through to his internal organs. It was a bit unfortunate that his threads had managed to disperse the lightning-based Elemental Blade we had active, but we’d still manage to hurt him nonetheless.

“Gargh... Hundred Thread Tourniquet.”

[Holy shit, just how versatile are those god damn threads of his...?]

Fermus wrapped a series of threads along his bleeding midsection. Luckily, he didn't seem capable of pulling off what a certain individual from H*nter x Hunt*r could in the sense that couldn't repair his nerves by attaching them with threads, but, he was at least capable of closing his wound and stopping any bleeding.

Annoyingly enough, Fermus' skills prevented him from feeling pain, which in turn meant that his wound wouldn't really affect his ability to do battle given that it'd stopped bleeding. To make matters even worse, he was currently equipped with a Bracelet of HP Recovery as opposed to the Ring of Poison Nullification he was wearing yesterday, so he would eventually heal if we gave him enough time to do so.

Landing a hit had also increased Fermus' awareness of the dangers of engaging us in close combat. Because of that, he'd retreated further than he usually did, and had started concentrating his magical energy into his fingertips.

“You're really quite skilled. It seems I'll have to rely on a tactic that deals a lesser degree of damage from afar. Ten Thousand Thread Technique— Cardinal Spirit Assault!”

All of Fermus' threads simultaneously began moving to attack us. Each was imbued with one of the cardinal elements of water, fire, wind, and earth.

Not even the strongest of the threads could output more damage than a low tier spell, but, the sheer number of them combined with the limited space we had to move through made it so we couldn't actually avoid taking damage.

“Kuah!”

[Heal!]

[Heal!]

[Short Jump!]

We somehow managed to prevent ourselves from really getting caught in his attack

by roasting and cutting at the incoming threads while also throwing the occasional heal and teleport into the mix. The issue, however, was that our mana was slowly starting to drain itself dry

However, the same could in fact be said for Fermus. The sheer scale of his attack both drained his stamina and mana.

In fact, it seemed like we would be able to outsustain him if we cancelled Brilliant Lightning Rush and stalled him out by constantly healing up.

Or so I thought. Something ended up happening before I could even bother pitching the plan to Fran.

“Argh!”

[Shit! Greater Heal!]

“Something... attacking!”

[G-Greater Heal!]

Deep gashes had suddenly appeared in Fran’s legs. I healed them, but her arms ended up getting lopped off before she actually fully recovered.

I couldn’t figure out what was going on. The barrier I had up didn’t react to the attack. Fermus’s attacks somehow seemed to be passing right through our defenses.

[Dimension Shift!]

I cast a spell that should’ve allowed us a moment to recuperate.

“Mmph!”

[Heal!]

But, for some odd reason, it failed to do its job. A cut appeared on Fran’s cheek nonetheless. Fermus was clearly somehow circumventing both our barriers and Dimension Shift.

I turned up all my detection based skills in an attempt to figure out what was hitting us. Doing so allowed me to detect that some of his threads were actually passing through both our defenses and the others as they assaulted us. Their properties seemed rather similar to those of my Dimensional Sword spell.

That was when it finally clicked. He was making use of the Space/Time element that came with the Monarch Whale's Beard War Threads he had equipped.

"No point in barrier."

[Good point.]

It was literally impossible for us to constantly identify and actively avoid all the space/time element threads when we were being assaulted by so many other similar-looking threads. Likewise, there was no point in us trying to buy time through the use of Dimension Shift.

I'd noticed that he hadn't attacked us immediately after we'd teleported, and from that, recognized that it was possible that he couldn't create the threads at a moment's notice. However, I couldn't say I was 100% sure that was actually the case.

I really had no idea whether or not he could. As a result, I couldn't actually figure out if we'd ultimately be swallowed up by his threads the moment we teleported, I didn't the time to brood about it any longer.

It was time to act.

(Master, using trump card!)

[Alright, go for it! We'll have to gamble on it working if we want to win!]

Chapter 214

White and Black Lightning

Fermus' attacks had grown to be much more intense, but our Sword Lord Arts and detection-related skills allowed us to prevent ourselves from getting done in. They made it so we could somehow manage to dodge everything that came at us as we focused on concentrating our mana.

There was no point in continuing with the strategy we'd been employing thus far; maintaining the status quo wouldn't be to our benefit. The dragon hunter was more than capable of defending against any of our weaker attacks by simply deploying a barrier made of string.

Every single thread he had was worth mention, as most had good magical conductivity stats. He could bolster both their durability and power even further through the acts of twisting them together and forming larger, more compact masses of thread. It was a near universal tactic that allowed him to deal with every single one of the attacks we'd thrown at him and more with ease.

In other words, we had no choice but to attack him with something that would overcome his defenses with pure power, and pure power alone.

[Let's do this!]

(Master, fully prepared?)

[Don't worry about all the stuff on my end. You just do you.]

(Then, starting.)

[Go for it!]

I let loose all the magical energy I'd been compounding and poured it into a single spell.

[Haaaaaah! Kanna Kamui!]^[1]

The attack I unleashed was one so difficult to control it rendered me unable to do anything else for its duration. It took me using Parallel Processing and concentrating as hard as I could just to keep myself from losing control of it.

I couldn't help but think that the difficulty that came with using Kanna Kamui was in fact justified given that it was the strongest lightning spell, the one we'd learned when the Lightning Magic skill finally hit level 10.

It was a spell that the humans and individuals belonging to other, similar races could obtain should they train up their Lightning Magic skill. That said, I felt like it was something they would unlikely be able to put to practical use. Kanna Kamui simply ate too much mana and required too much processing power for that to be possible. Those that did manage to somehow gather enough magical energy to cast it would likely burn out their neurons the moment they tried.

A roar, a feral but majestic warcry, resounded through the battlefield as a dragon-shaped bolt of white lightning descended from the sky and crashed into the arena.

"Gaaah! Is that really...!?"

Fermus' voice was tinged with a bit of panic. His prided barrier of threads was unable to hold against our attack and had started to char and give off an electrostatic discharge.

I was a bit surprised that the dragon hunter's defenses were able to hold, even for just a moment.

"Black Lightning Advent!"

But in the end, it didn't matter. Kanna Kamui had done its job; it'd torn its way through Fermus' barrier and made him vulnerable. He no longer had any means to ward off it or the black lightning that Fran immediately assaulted him with afterwards.

"Ugraaaaahhhhhhhh!!!!"

The black and white lightning-based attacks melded together as they swallowed him whole. We were blown away by the resulting shockwave much in the same manner we

had been back when we used the attack on Goldalfa. Fran ended up vomiting out blood because her back had smashed into the barrier set to protect the audience.

“Gaah!”

[Long Jump!]

I somehow managed to regain enough focus to teleport and relocate us up in the air above the arena.

“Ugh... Heal!”

[You alright?]

“Some... how...”

Black Lightning Advent wasn’t exactly what you could normally use in an area as small as the tourney’s arena, so we ended up damaging ourselves quite a bit.

We tried looking down as we let ourselves freefall, but we weren’t able to gather any sort of meaningful intel. The barrier’s insides were filled with flashes of white and black as the two types of lightning raged through it.

(Close call.)

[Yeah... We might’ve ended up killing ourselves before we killed Fermus if we ended up staying inside.]

We’d actually considered hitting Goldalfa with the combination we’d just subjected Fermus to, but ended up setting the idea aside after deducing that it was way too suicidal a tactic to consider. There simply wasn’t enough space in the barrier for us to get away from our own attacks unscathed.

Seeing Urushi retreat all the way out of the barrier when we fought Goldalfa had actually inspired me to do the same, so I checked the rules, and confirmed that we wouldn’t be disqualified for being out of bounds so long as our feet didn’t touch the ground outside the arena.

Escaping from the barrier actually allowed us to use it as a shield.

Or so I thought.

“Master, look!”

[Holy shit! You have to be kidding me, is it gunna blow...!?!]

The barrier had started to swell up. Bolts of electrical energy had started leaking out from its interior. It looked like things were about to start going south.

(Master, any ideas?)

[Uhh... actually yeah! I think I got something! Dimension Gate!]

I opened a distortion in space time with one end in the barrier, and the other end out. The electrical energies within the barrier immediately began flowing through the newfound exit with an incredible force.

But not even that was enough to stop the barrier from swelling up even further. It kinda seemed like the rate at which it was swelling had decreased, but I wasn't too sure because it was still growing larger, and at a similar pace to boot.

And then, it happened.

The sound of an explosion nearly ruptured our eardrums as the barrier burst.

A sudden windstorm assaulted the audience and pushed every single one of its members into their seats.

“Kyaaaah!”

“Hiiiiii!”

“O-Oh god, someone help me!”

It was a veritable pandemonium of screams and cries.

Fortunately, the barrier's top was what had broken first, so all the lightning had ended up getting discharged towards the sky as opposed to crashing into the audience and

wounding its members. Likewise, most of the swirling winds had also shot themselves directly upwards, so the audience had only been hit by the residual energy that followed. That said, it still contained enough force to send a child soaring through the skies.

I later learned that the lightning had ended up taking the form of a tree made out of light as it was ejected from the arena, one that reached all the way up to the heavens themselves.

The barrier repaired itself after a few seconds passed.

Fortunately, it didn't look like the rubble that'd been ejected together with the lightning had done any major damage.

[Whew, that coulda turned out pretty poorly.]

"Nn. Reflecting."

She and I were both aware we kinda forgot the circumstances and went a bit overboard.

[How about we focus on how we're going to land for now?]

"Master, thoughts?"

[I'm almost out of mana. Though, I still do have enough to soften our landing with telekinesis.]

"Good enough."

By almost out, I meant that I didn't have anything more than just a sliver remaining. I didn't have enough to allow us a slow landing. It simply wasn't an option. The same went for Fran as well. She'd already dispelled her awakened status because she didn't have the mana to maintain it any longer.

I scrounged up everything I had and managed to dampen the force of the impact just enough for Fran to land atop the newly reformed barrier that enshrouded the arena.

"Whew."

[I wonder how Fermus is doing.]

He can't be alive after all that, can he?

The stage had been completely obliterated. Not a trace of it remained. Most of the dirt that filled the place had been outright deleted.

All we had beneath us was a single, massive crater with its deepest part 20 meters below what used to be ground level.

The arena looked much like the arena in Dr*gon Ball had after Tien blew it up with his Tri-Beam.

“Oh my god ladies and gentlemen, would you look at that! How the hell do I even begin to describe what just happened!? Folks, what we just saw was something that I'm not even sure could've possibly been done by human hands. I've been doing this for a long time, but, never before have I ever seen the barrier get destroyed by the combatants fighting inside of it!”^[2]

The audience was stunned, but the caster managed to calm its members down by doing her job and describing the situation.

“What a grueling sight to behold! Can you believe that its perpetrator is only a mere 12 years of age!?”

We'd given the audience a bit of a shock. Some people were crying. Others were completely spaced out. There was even a group that'd started attempting to escape the colosseum. Regardless of exactly what it was they were doing, it was clear that most people were panicking.

Hearing the caster describe the situation in the same manner she always would caused them to regain their bearings.

“And if you look at the crater's center, you'll see Fermus being revived by the Cradle of Time! That lightning strike was so powerful that not even the dragon hunter could withstand it! The scramble for third place is now officially over, with the victor being the Black Lightning Princess!”

A huge cheer emerged from the crowd as the caster declared Fran's victory.

I couldn't help but question how the spectators were as calm and willing to cheer for us as they were considering that a fair number of them had seemed to have thought that Fran had just brought them to death's door — not that I was complaining. If anything, I was glad they didn't end up being terrified of us. It seemed most of them had even ended up enjoying what we'd done as they would have a thrilling roller coaster.

[Let's head back down, I guess.]

"Nn. Urushi."

"Woof!"

Urushi responded to Fran's summon almost immediately. He hadn't really had any chances to help out or even join in during the match, so he was totally pumped and motivated to at least be of use as a means of transport. Fran got on top of him and had him carry her off the barrier.

Seeing Fran straddle and ride the giant flying wolf made the crowd's cheers grow even louder. The support bolstered Urushi's mood and caused him to decide to do a full circle around the arena, which in turn prompted the audience to cheer with even more vigour.

I had to admit, the scene of him parading around with everyone cheering did have a bit of a picturesque feel to it.

[You know, Fran, it might actually be a good idea for you to wave to the audience and whatnot.]

"Nn? Like this?"

Her actions caused the crowd to once again let loose an incredibly loud cheer. Her departure from the stage almost seemed to resemble an idol's.

"Woo! Fran!"

"Damn! That's the Black Lightning Princess for you!"

“Please be my little sister!”

The reception she got really was quite similar to the type idols would get. If I had to pinpoint a reason, I’d say it was probably because of how cute she was. That said, I wasn’t about to let her become anyone’s little sister.

Wait a second. How the hell are we supposed to get off the stage if there... isn’t a stage? I mean, I knew we were kinda the people responsible for blowing it up in the first place, but like, still, what do?

[1] No, not the girl from Maidragon. It’s a reference to Ainu mythology. Kanna Kamui is the God of Lightning, and I believe the #1 god. I’m not too well versed in Ainu mythology myself, so this is literally me reading Japanese wikipedia and giving you a tl;dr.

[2] Caster was revealed to (probably) be a girl based on how she talks at this point point in time.

Chapter 215

The Tournament Draws to a Close

The day's second match wasn't able to start even after the first ended. It was originally scheduled to begin about an hour afterwards, but it couldn't. The massive, gaping hole we'd created ended up ruling that option out in its entirety. The necessarily repairs simply couldn't be completed in time.

"Looks like the finals will be starting soon."

"Mmph."

"Are you *still* eating?"

"Mmmphrrnnph"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. You can eat as much as you want."

The Beast Lord had once again summoned us to the VIP room, which turned out to be real convenient seeing as how we'd planned on checking in with him anyways. He seemed to have caught onto the fact that Fran was a foodie, as the room was filled with all sorts of extravagant dishes laid out much in the same manner as they would be at a buffet.

She, being who she was, had naturally ended up falling victim to their appeal. That is, she did as the Beast Lord wished and decided on watching the finals together with him and his associates — which, in and of itself, wasn't really a bad thing. Their invitation was actually one that took Fran's convenience into account. She'd become extremely popular, especially amongst her fellow beastkin.

I was almost certain that there wasn't a beastkin present in the arena that wouldn't want to talk to her, especially seeing as how she'd finished all her matches and raked in the third place prize. They'd been rather patient and calm up until now, but it didn't seem like they could hold themselves back much longer. Some had even begun to seem to want to stalk her.

People, as a whole, had the tendency to be rather stupid regardless of where or when. From that understanding came the assumption that she would most likely be approached by one or more nobles that wished to use their positions in order to extort her.

In other words, staying in the Beast Lord's vicinity benefited us because it would likely prevent any less morally sound individuals from acting out of line.

The Beast Lord had taken a decent liking to Fran, but that didn't necessarily mean he was free of ulterior motives. She, as an evolved Black Catkin, was definitely someone that could be of use to him. Thus, his invitation had likely been extended because he didn't want any other noble stealing a march on him and doing something that would cause Fran to feel ill will towards the Beastkin's Country or its residents.

Of course, not all the benefits the Beast Lord could derive from having her around were longer termed ones. Seeing him with her would likely lead onlookers to view him in a more favourable light.

Being the world's one and only evolved Black Catkin was something that, by nature, granted Fran an incredible amount of attention.

I wasn't actually sure whether or not Fran knew just how much attention she would be getting, but she was at least roughly aware of the consequences of revealing her identity. The reason I could say that with certainty was because Fran had wanted to use the tournament as a means of becoming famous in hopes of bettering the world's treatment of the Black Catkin race.

That was why she'd purposefully awakened under public scrutiny. She was more than willing to draw attention to herself so long as she managed to bring benefit to her tribesmen.

We'd been a bit worried that nations and nobles would end up eyeing her, but acquainting ourselves with the Beast Lord had at least mitigated that concern to an extent.

"Here. Take this."

"Nn. Thanks."

“No problem.”

For some odd reason, Goldalfa was going out of his way to provide Fran with all the service she could possibly ask for.

He'd even headed down to the kitchen and asked for both more of Fran's favourite dish and raw meat for Urushi.

Asking him why he was acting so subserviently had caused him to respond with several interesting notes. The first was that he respected Fran, both as a warrior that'd defeated him in battle, and as member of one of the Ten Original Tribes. The other was that her personality was almost identical to his master's; he was more than just used to being ordered around by Kiara. The combination of the aforementioned factors made it so he was in fact unable to refuse any of Fran's orders or requests.

“Oi, look. They're about to start.”

“Nn.”

We watched closely as both Amanda and Forrund took to the stage.

Both contestants were extremely popular, and as a result, the cheers that resounded for them turned out to be so loud they caused the entire colosseum to shake in the same manner it would have had it been hit by an earthquake.

The roars were so loud that they pierced through the VIP room's soundproof walls and caused everyone inside to cover their ears. It was cute when Fran did it, but, the same couldn't be said for the Beast Lord and his companions. Seeing them cover their cover their ears in a childish manner left a pretty bad taste in my mouth.

“Entering from the west, we have Amanda of Hariti! The rumours say that the semi-final round had made her weapon unusable! Just how will she handle today's match!?”

Amanda didn't manage to get her whip repaired in time. The one she had with her today was a decently powerful magic item, but several grades poorer nonetheless.

“And against her will be Hundred Blade Forrund, a powerful adventurer said to be on the brink of becoming an S rank!”

The two A ranked adventurers exchanged a few words as they stared each other down.

Unfortunately, the crowd made it so we couldn't hear them despite the massive screen-like thing magnifying their voices.

Either way, the match ended up beginning.

Their duel was a fierce one.

Amanda immediately distanced herself from Forrund and began bombarding him with both storm-based spells and her whip.

The stage, which the staff had gone out of their way to painstakingly repair, ended up getting torn to pieces in the blink of an eye. Much to my surprise, Amanda ended up using the resulting rubble to boost her attack's power by sucking it into her storms.

Forrund, on the other hand, did his best to close in on Amanda while spawning and throwing magic swords. He was capable of being extremely effective in long ranged combat, but he wasn't able to outdo Amanda, who happened to specialize in it.

The first major event happened about ten minutes in. Amanda suddenly started to throw out more powerful attacks in an attempt to bring the match to a close, seemingly because her whip had started to run out of durability.

She knew she would eventually lose if she didn't do something.

"Secret Art — Skanda's Demise!"

This time, however, she attacked not with the storm she'd sent at us, but instead with a single, godspeed blow.

I didn't even actually see her strike him. The only reason I knew she did was because his Forrund's arm had gone flying.

Her looking rather vexed in spite of that made it clear that she'd been aiming for his head, and that he'd somehow managed to dodge.

The whipmaster's weapon immediately began to crumble, a result likely in part

brought about by the fact that it was a backup weapon and, relatively speaking, an inferior good.

Because she lost her weapon, Amanda also ultimately ended up losing the battle.

“And the winner, the one man that triumphed over all his peers, is Hundred Blade Forrund!”

Fran regarded Forrund with a serious look on her face as the caster named him the tournament’s victor.

[He sure is strong.]

(Nn! But will surpass one day. Both Amanda and Forrund.)

[That we will.]

Likewise, the Beast Lord was also starring Forrund down. His eyes, however, expressed a much different emotion. It was almost like he was a predator observing its prey.

“So Forrund won? Man... I really would like to give sparring him a go.”

“Please ensure you stay calm and rational, Your Majesty.”

“Make sure you don’t suddenly jump at and attack him, alright, Lord Rig?”

“Well yeah, no shit! Just what the hell do you guys take me for?”

“I guess the best way to describe it would be to call you a combat enthusiast.”

“I’d say a battle maniac.”

“Oh come on...”

It seemed not even the seemingly ever arrogant Beast Lord was a match for Royce and Roche combined. Getting called out by both had caused him to shut up.

“It’ll soon be time for the awards ceremony. You should probably get ready, Fran.”

Royce reminded us of something that'd totally slipped my mind. Fran had managed to rank herself in at third place, so she wouldn't be able to skip the ceremony.

The tourney had actually contained three different types of contests. The first was the restrictionless one one that we participated in. The second only allowed those at or under level 20, and the third was open to parties between three and five people strong.

Both the other two types had already ended. The type we participated in was the one that tended to house the greatest number of, and the most skilled participants, so it ended up dragging on the longest. That said, all the awards ceremonies were set to take place at the same time.

That was nice and all, but I had a pretty major concern with the whole scenario. I didn't actually know how I was supposed to get Fran, who really hated boring ceremonies, to actually sit still and behave herself throughout the whole goddamn thing.

Chapter 216

The Beast Lord's Predecessor

Participating in the tourney had provided us with a large number of benefits and gains, the most significant of which being Fran's evolution. I was pretty sure that we would've probably still just been grasping at straws had we not come to Ulmutt.

Our stay in the city had also allowed us to learn what Black Catkin needed to do to evolve, both as individuals, and as a race. Those two pieces of knowledge were, in Fran's opinion, probably two of the most important bits of intel we'd learned to date.

Another important thing to note was that we'd been able to face off against a series of incredibly powerful opponents. Us losing to Amanda had caused us a bit of frustration, but we ultimately ended up accepting it and moving on. We both understood that it was important for us to learn from the loss, and thus, we'd used it, and our other battles, to come to a better understanding of our strengths and weakness. We'd even gone as far as deriving a few new strategies we could use in combat.

Honestly, the only reason we were able to learn so much was because we'd understood that there was a safety net, and that neither we nor our opponents would die regardless of how the battle ended.

The connections we built with the Beast Lord allowed us to hear of the Black Cat Tribe's current state. That too was a pretty significant gain considering it took a load off Fran's mind.

Last but not least was the fact Fran had gotten a really cool sounding nickname.

[Oh god damn it Fran! At least try to stay awake!]

"Mmph... Still... awake..."

[Just hold on a little bit longer alright? Especially cause it's finally your turn.]

"Nn..."

[How 'bout this? I'll give you some sort of reward if you make it all the way through the ceremony without falling asleep.]

"Nn. Type of curry I haven't tried."

[Alright, sure. I'll make you something, so just think about it, hang tight, and don't fall asleep.]

"Uhhmm... Is there a Black Catkin named Fran present? If so, its your turn now, so please step up onto the stage."

[Let's go, they're calling you up.]

"Nn."

Ulmutt's feudal lord, a man we were seeing for the first time, awarded Fran with a medal of honour as she got up onto the stage.

Apparently the guy wasn't actually responsible for anything, and kinda just sat there and existed. His approach to governing Ulmutt was a rather hands off one; Dias was the person really running the city and managing its inner workings.

The medal we were given had both Ulmutt's crest and the number 3 carved into it. Apparently, that wasn't all we would be getting, a prize of 100k Golde would be delivered to us later on.

"You fought splendidly."

"Nn."

Fran replied in her usual manner, but ended up using her Court Etiquette skill to deliver a tasteful bow. Though the combination of the two didn't actually end up seeming all that polite, it did lead to a series of loud cheers and huge round of applause.

The only reason she'd even bothered bowing in the first place was because I incessantly reminded her that she needed to make sure she was being polite. I didn't want people to suddenly start keeping tabs on us because we hadn't good manners.



And so, three hours flew right by.

We'd slated ourselves to visit the Beast Lord again after the ceremony came to an end. Hence we found ourselves in front of the city's most expensive inn alongside a large number of other beastkin.

Our destination was the room, or rather, the floor, that he'd rented out.

I listened to the other beastkin speak as we moved through the crowd.

Most of the crowd's members were nobles that served under the Beast Lord or their associates. They had apparently come because they'd realized that the Beast Lord was in a good mood. Despite that, he wasn't actually willing to see any of them. He'd shut them out because he hadn't wanted to deal with them, he thought it too much of a pain in the ass and ultimately not worth his time.

Surprisingly, the crowd's members hadn't been infuriated by his actions. It seemed that most had actually expected him to act the way he did, as apparently, his current attitude wasn't one that deviated at all from what he considered the norm. A large portion of the crowd had still decided to visit in spite of their expectations because they figured that a chance was a chance, and that they didn't really have anything to lose by standing around and double checking his intentions. The rest seemed to think that it was improper for them to ignore the king that ruled over their homeland regardless of what sort of attitude he planned to take.

The fact that all the individuals present were beastkin also meant that they all knew exactly who Fran was. As a result, she ended up garnering a whole ton of attention.

A few of the nobles seemed to have wanted to call out to Fran, but they were momentarily dissuaded the moment Urushi, who was currently at his regular size, turned his glare towards them. We used the impact to slip through the crowd and make our way over to the inn.

I had the sneaking suspicion that he wouldn't actually agree to see us, but it turned out I was way off the mark. He'd specifically instructed the inn's staff to let Fran see him, so she got past security without any issue.

“Well, I didn’t expect to see you so soon.”

“Tell about Kiara.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Sit yourself down and I’ll talk.”

“Nn.”

Fran perked up her ears and got ready to listen to the Beast Lord as she enjoyed the tea Roche made for her.

“It would probably make more sense for me to tell you about my old man, the Beast Lord I overthrew, before telling you ’bout anything else.”

“Got it.”

The Beast Lord’s predecessor was a man that went by the name Vairsas Narasimha. He was a weak man that harboured much more doubt than trust. He would always be paranoid that everyone was out to get him. His vassals were terrified, not of him, but rather, of the fact that he was king. He was extremely weak for a Golden Flame Lionkin, and only barely managed to obtain the evolution by leeching his predecessors. That, in and of itself, wasn’t too much of a problem. He wasn’t the only Beast Lord to have ever been in such a circumstance, but, unlike his predecessors, he had no talent for war; he wasn’t suited to the act of commanding an army. The sheer extent of his weakness caused him to develop a sort of inferiority complex. Said complex led Vairsas to be terrified of those that possessed greater power than him. And thus, he soon began to ostracize and purge any that caught his eye.

His ridiculous, idiotic antics had caused his country to fall into a weakened state, one that lasted until Rigdis overthrew him.

Vairsas’ weakness led him to set his eyes on the Black Cat Tribe. He hadn’t minded the tribe at all prior to his ascension to the throne, but, learning the secrets the royal family retained caused him to change his views.

He immediately ordered the Blue Cat Tribe to redouble their efforts in enslaving the Black Cat Tribe’s members while also ordering them to keep an eye on any Black Catkin living outside his country’s borders. Of course, the reason that he issued the order was because he was paranoid. He was afraid that a Black Catkin would one day

evolve and dethrone him.

“My old man was so pathetic that he wasn’t able to do anything beyond just ordering the enslavement the Black Cat Tribe.”

Vairsas could’ve easily issued a royal decree that demanded the Black Cat Tribe be driven to extinction. It’s what would’ve made the most sense.

But he didn’t.

He was too cowardly.

The former Beast Lord was afraid that eliminating the Black Cat Tribe would incur the Gods’ wrath. He didn’t know whether or not his actions would ultimately be forgiven. Moreover, he was worried that the any Black Catkin that slipped through his fingers would vow to take revenge. His many concerns plagued him and prevented him from so much as even thinking the option through.

“Not that I’m saying that’s a bad thing. It’s the only reason Grandma Kiara’s still alive and kickin’.”

He’d told his subordinates to bring Kiara to him upon hearing of her through the Blue Cat Tribe.

Rigdis’ father hesitated, he wasn’t able to convince himself to execute her, and thus, he’d thought up a few reasons to keep her around.

The first was to make an example out of her. He wanted to demonstrate to the Black Cat Tribe’s members that it was impossible for them to disobey him regardless of how strong they ended up getting.

The second was to demonstrate the extent of the royal family’s noble dignity. He wanted to show off the fact that he could make a powerful Black Catkin obey him.

That was why Kiara had been working in the palace on the day it was attacked and nearly overrun.

“My old man used her tribesmen as hostages and forced her to become his slave.”

She was assigned to trash duty, and thus, she ultimately ended up meeting Rigdis, Royce, and Goldalfa.

Kiara's spirit had never broken despite the many years of slave labour she'd been forced to endure. In fact, she'd vouched that working as a slave was something that required way less effort than diving into dungeons, and as a result, she'd never actually suffered so long as one disregarded the horrible stench she had to endure on a daily basis.

The Black Cat Tribe as a whole had seemed to have grown accustomed to slavery, as they were more resistant to suffering than any of the other tribes.

"Meeting the old lady made us question our beliefs. We no longer understood why all the other tribes looked down on the Black Cat Tribe, nor why their members always got turned into slaves."

The Beast Lord and his companions had been made to recognize Kiara's strength. She was so overwhelmingly powerful that she completely blew their notions of the Black Cat Tribe's inferiority out of the water.

For that reason, the Beast Lord ended up doing research, research that led him to discover the sin the Black Catkin had committed in the past, and the reason that things were currently how they were.

He came to believe that the way they were being treated was unjust, that there was no point in persecuting them any further because they'd already been punished by the Gods. He even started believing that it was his duty as a member of the royal family to aid them in their quest for atonement.

Rigdis realized that his predecessor had only made everything worse. The fact that they'd gone as far as destroying documents pertaining to Black Catkin evolutions had left him baffled.

As a result, not even the royal family knew exactly what a Black Catkin had to do in order to evolve. That, in part, was why he promised Fran that he'd spread the methodology all around his country if she was willing to share it.

"I guess you could say I was just a bit disgusted by how my old man was handling things. That's why I trained myself up as per Grandma Kiara's instructions, made

myself even stronger through adventuring, got supporters, beat his ass, and took his throne for myself.”

Rigdis would probably never admit it regardless of how we questioned him, but it seemed to me that the whole reason he’d gone as far as soiling his reputation by murdering his father was because he wanted to do something for Kiara and her tribesmen.

“Thanks.”

Fran understood his sentiments as well, and for that reason, she even ended up bowing in gratitude.

“Yeah, yeah, knock that off already. I only did what I did to satisfy my own ego. Having you thank me is just making me feel awkward and shit.”

“Nn. Got it.”

Fran acknowledged his words with her own, but never did end up budging. She instead simply continued to maintain a respectful bow.

Chapter 217

A Discussion About the Future

“Heya Fran. Congrats on winning third.”

“Mmph.”

“Kukuku. I’m guessing you realized I didn’t quite mean that as just a compliment?”

Dias began congratulating Fran in a teasing tone the moment we entered his room. It was painfully obvious that he’d totally seen through her and knew exactly how she felt.

“...Because lost to Amanda.”

“You know, a normal C ranker would be more than just bragging if they managed to get themselves all the way up to third place.”

The Guildmaster’s shit-eating grin failed to fade as he shrugged. He was only saying what he was because he knew Fran wasn’t the type to suddenly start boasting about how well she did.

He did have a point though. Common sense dictated that a C ranker beating out an A ranker wasn’t something that could normally be accomplished. It was such a miraculous feat that pulling through with it justified getting full of oneself.

“Also can’t beat Beast Lord.”

“Well, his case is a bit special. Not even I would be able to so much as lift a finger against him.”

“Will win someday.”

“The fact that you’re saying that like you seriously mean it is somewhat terrifying.”

The thing was that Fran really did seriously mean what she said. She wanted to grow strong enough to one day beat the Beast Lord down.

That said, she'd have to first get strong enough to beat down Amanda and Forrund before even considering putting up a fight against an S ranker.

"To be honest, I tried getting you promoted again, but my request didn't get approved."

"Even though just became C ranker?"

[Aren't you pushing for things to happen a bit too quickly?]

"I mean, you guys did actually manage to take down an A ranker. You're way more capable than the average C ranker should be when it comes to your ability to fight."

[Yeah, I guess you're right. But if that's the case, why didn't it end up working out?]

Dias' mention of our strength in battle clearly meant that we weren't meeting at least one requirement that didn't relate to it.

"There are actually quite a few problems according to the other guildmasters."

"Other Guildmasters?"

"Yeah, I used a magic item to speak with a few of them."

The biggest problem was apparently Fran's age.

"There were a good number of them going on and on about how there wasn't any precedent for what I was trying to do. I hate dealing with people like them. I'm actually planning on weeding them all out in due time."

[Yeah uh, you have fun with that.]

Dias mentioned something that I figured it'd probably be best for us to stay out of.

"Some people also claimed that you couldn't really judge just how good someone was at adventuring based on their performance in a controlled environment like a tournament."

“Understood.”

I had to admit, the second argument Dias presented to us was a solid one. The tourney had rules and restrictions in place. It didn't really serve to prove the full extent of one's skill, nor did it even come close to emulating the many types of situations you'd find yourself in while out adventuring.

One's caliber as an adventurer needed to be measured through more than just one's ability to fight. You also had to take into account one's knowledge of magic and magic beasts, one's ability to detect and disarm traps, one's ability to stay calm, and one's ability to think outside the box.

Of course, combat prowess was indeed still the most valuable of the aforementioned skills, so labeling someone that'd beaten an A ranker a B ranker honestly shouldn't have been a problem.

“Then there's also the speed at which you're rising through the ranks. They're worried people'll start complaining because it'd look like you were getting preferential treatment or something.”

The third point was yet another one I couldn't argue against. Fran had only managed to rank herself all the way up to C because Dias had basically pulled out the nepotism card.

“Another issue they brought up was your lack of experience as a leader.”

“Want explanation.”

“B ranked adventurers are expected to act as commander in times of crisis. They're supposed to lead other adventurers should they ever find themselves in a situation involving magic beast stampedes, disaster-tier events, or onslaughts made by more powerful magic beasts, just to name a few.”

[Yeah, that doesn't exactly sound like something Fran could pull off.]

“Nn. Can't. Too bothersome.”

“That's what I thought, hence why it was one of the few points I acknowledged as

reasonable.”

Fran’s personality more or less made it flat out impossible for her to do anything along the lines of commanding an army.

“The last point made against your case was that you didn’t quite seem to have the right sort of temperament considering that B rankers have to deal with the requests the guild gets from the nobility.”

“Really?”

“Kinda, yeah. Under normal circumstances, adventurers can pick and choose the requests they feel like taking. Some requests come from highly influential locals, others, from royalty. Requests like those are ones we can’t refuse, and so, we assign them to adventurers we know are competent and likely to complete them.”

A rankers were powerful, but few in number, so they were typically kept on hold in case of an emergency. Hence, the requests were instead handed off to B rankers.

The B rankers in question would undoubtedly have to deal with the individuals that’d first made the request. There was a chance that the noble or whatever would end up getting pissed the hell off if the adventurer sent to them didn’t have the right sort of temperament or attitude.

“Though, that didn’t really seem to come off as an issue to me based on how you acted at the awards ceremony.”

In other words, it was something Fran’s Court Etiquette could compensate for. I admitted that the way she talked could likely lead to people thinking she was rude, but that wasn’t really much of an issue so long as she relied on the more taciturn side of her personality.

“I think that’s everything that was said. Sorry, but you’ll still stuck at C rank.”

“Nn. Don’t mind.”

[It’s not really something that could be helped.]

Becoming a B ranker at only 12 years old would essentially label her an exception

amongst exceptions, so there being pushback only made sense. I personally didn't think there was anything wrong with slowly working our way through requests and building up a reputation before finally ranking up, as we could use the events that accompanied them in order to train ourselves up and make ourselves even stronger.

"To be honest, the only reason I tried having your rank raised in the first place was because I felt like I owed you a favour"

"Owed favour?"

"It's because you're the only reason I now know what ended up happening to Kiara."

"Really?"

"Really. You're the reason the Beast Lord and I were able to talk the way we did, especially seeing as how I can't help but still bear a grudge against him and his line."

Dias bowed deeply in order to demonstrate the extent of his gratitude.

"Thank you, Fran. I really appreciate what you've done for me, for us."

Dias was so thankful he completely dropped his usual playful attitude and spoke in a serious tone.

"I'm glad to have finally fulfilled the pact I made with Rumina. It feels like there's been a huge load taken off my back."

Hearing him mention Rumina reminded me of her circumstances. I was a bit concerned that she'd be subjugated now that she'd fulfilled her purpose.

[Speaking of which, what's going to end up happening to the dungeon?]

"Well, Rumina's lost a lot of her power. The number of monsters within her dungeon has decreased drastically, so we'll probably need to lower the dungeons' ranks by 1 letter grade each."

[I see.]

"Sorry."

Fran's evolution had a direct, negative effect on Ulmutt's economy, as the city essentially revolved around the dungeon it contained.

Dias probably shouldn't have been too happy with us, but surprisingly, he wasn't actually angry. He ended up lightly shaking his head as he smiled.

"The truth of the matter is that Rumina had always thought there was a chance that leading a Black Catkin to evolve would also cause her to lose her life. Having the two dungeons drop a rank each isn't really anything to note if you compare it to what could've ended up happening."

[Yeah, but the fact stands that you guys won't be able to get as many materials or magic stones as you used to.]

"I can't say that won't happen, but, the dungeons are actually even more suited to training newer adventurers in their current state. They'll come en masse, so we'll be able to compensate for our loss of income through increased trade."

The depth of Dias' thoughts served to prove that he really was deserving of his position despite his usual attitude. I was glad that we wouldn't really be damaging Ulmutt's economy.

"Oh, right. I've also got a request here with your name on it."

[You're talking about the one you said you'd give us after we ranked up to C, right?]

"Right. I know you and the Beast Lord are no longer on terrible terms with each other, but I'd already informed several other branches that I was going to be issuing a designated request ahead of time, so I can't be taking it back now."

[What'll we need to do?]

"I was thinking of giving you one that'd send you over to the Beastkin's Country. You should be able to bypass all those troublesome immigration processes if you're heading over at the guild's request. Likewise, the branches we have over there should also offer you their support once you arrive."

"What to do after arrival?"

“I’d like you to locate a missing adventurer that one day just upped and vanished. None of the people looking for her have been able to come in direct contact with her, so they’d like for someone to confirm that she’s still safe.”

So he wants us to look for Kiara? Man, talk about turning a personal problem into official business.

“Nnnn...”

[Sounds good to me. What say you, Fran?]

“Want to go to auction.”

[You mean the one that’s going to take place in the capital? I mean, I’d like to go there too, but it’s not like we absolutely have to. I’d say we should prioritize heading over to the Beastkin’s Country for now.]

(Can maybe get good magic stones at auction.)

[Yeah, but that’s a maybe, not anything guaranteed. The same could be said for the Beastkin’s country anyways. Don’t worry too much about me, and just go.]

“But...”

“Is something the matter?”

“Want to go to auction in June.”

“Oh, that? You’ve still got a whole month before that happens. You should be able to go to the Beastkin’s Country and come back within 3 odd weeks.”

[Looks like we can make both.]

“Nn. Then will go.”

Fran nodded happily, a clear indication that she’d actually really wanted to go to the Beastkin’s Country from the start.

Chapter 218

A Gathering of Those That Wish to Gather Around Us

A group of strange looking individuals approached Fran the moment she stepped outside the Adventurer's Guild.

All four of them wore grey robes that covered them from head to toe and obscured their faces from view. In their hands were staves made from the wood of a sort of old, knotted tree. They looked like mages, more specifically, the type you'd often see described in fairytales.

Their appearance fit the stereotype so well that I almost wanted to label them as cosplayers even though magic did exist and whatnot. The highly synchronized and nearly mechanical way they conducted themselves made them really seem out of place, and almost even suspicious.

Appraising them allowed me to confirm that they were indeed mages, but, none of them were actually all that powerful. The best among them was a water mage with associated magic leveled up to 7.

"What?"

Though they looked really suspicious, they didn't actually seem hostile, or wanting to harm us in any which way. As a result, I wasn't really able to figure out what they were after or how we were supposed to react to their presence.

The four of them split into two smaller groups, with one moving to the right, and the other to the left. They then raised their staves to the sky, as if to create a corridor.

A fifth individual walked through the newly created path. Unlike the other four, he was dressed up in a fancy looking, gold embroidered, purple robe. His staff was decorated with jewels, and clearly much more expensive.

Another difference between the man and the four other individuals that accompanied him was that his face was visible. His bright blue hair complimented his good looks, but, I still couldn't help but feel that he was kinda suspicious. A part of me almost wanted to say that it was precisely his handsome face that made him suspicious.

"I have been awaiting your advent, Milady."

"Nn? Who?"

"My name is Grakma, chief of the Ulmuttian branch of the Aiwass Magician's Guild."

Grakma's actions were so elegant that they almost seemed to have been pulled straight out of some sort of painting.

The Magician's Guild was something we'd heard of many times in the past, but we hadn't bothered involving ourselves with them or their members. Wait, Grakma said he was the Ulmutt branch's chief, right? Wouldn't that also make him one of the country's best mages? I highly doubted that to actually be the case. Grakma was basically the Magician's Guild's Guildmaster equivalent, but he really didn't match up.

He wasn't *that* weak, but he was in no way a match for Dias or Klimut.

Grakma was only level 20. He had the stats of your average D ranked adventurer, and wasn't even that skilled in magic. His best skills were Flame Magic, Storm Magic, and Lightning Magic with their levels at 3, 1, and 2 respectively. He basically didn't have any other skills to note. One could tell from looking at his stats that he'd fully specialized himself in the magical arts.

My biggest question, however, came not from his stats, but from his attitude. Why the hell was he referring to Fran as "Milady?"

"Your battles were nothing short of magnificent!"

"Okay."

"The sight of you casting incredible spells, one after the other, has done naught but move me to tears!"

I guess that kinda made sense given that he was a mage. To him, it must've looked like

Fran was constantly using high-tier spells nonstop. I'd been the one to cast Kanna Kamui, so he must've interpreted that as her using it without so much as even a chant.

"Milady, I cannot but label you as an Archmage!"

"Nn? Not mage."

I figured that "Archmage," was probably a title, but it made me think of classes anyways. I felt like Fran had probably unlocked a good few classes, and that it wouldn't be too bad an idea for us to go check.

Grakma missed the response Fran and muttered under her breath, and as a result, ended up continuing on as if nothing had happened. He pulled out a small box from his chest pocket, opened it, and showed its contents to Fran as he took a knee.

The four mages that accompanied him seemed to take his actions as a sort of cue, as they lowered their staves so that they were instead pointed forwards before moving as if to surround us.

It almost seemed like they were trying to initiate some sort of bizarre ritual. I knew that wasn't the case because they didn't actually end up giving off any sort of magical energy, but what seemed off still did seem off nonetheless, so I readied myself to use Telekinesis to send them flying the moment they tried anything.

"Please take this."

"This?"

"It is a medal that serves to present the greatest prestige that the Aiwass Magician's Guild, has to offer. Please, Milady, I beseech you take it."

"Prestige?"

The guild's chief continued pushing the box towards us despite the fact that we had no idea exactly what taking it entailed.

(Master?)

[Hmm... I'm not really sure what to do either.]

It didn't feel like any of the five mages present were casting or getting ready to cast any sort of spell, so I kinda felt that there wouldn't be any issue with us just taking the medal they were presenting to us.

"Please do accept it. It shall serve to evidence your ability as an Archmage."

They weren't lying, and they didn't seem to be our enemies, but I couldn't bring myself to trust them regardless.

[They seem really suspicious, so let's not for now. This is kinda sudden, I'd like to look into the Magician's Guild a bit more before actually accepting.]

"Nn. Don't need."

"W-Why not!?"

"Seems suspicious."

"Milady, that simply cannot b-"

"Okay, how about we cut this off here for now?"

"W-Who dares interfere!?"

Someone placed themselves between Fran and Grakma right as I started considering whether or not we should use force to make him stop bothering us.

"You Aiwass people never do change, do you?"

"Fermus?"

"Hey Fran, haven't seen you since yesterday."

The person that'd inserted themselves between Fran and the annoying mage was none other than the former A ranked thread user we'd just fought yesterday, Fermus.

"What are you doing!? Leave at once, adventurer! We are currently in the midst of an important ritual!"

“I know. The whole reason I interfered was to prevent you from completing said ridiculous ritual.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that?”

“Don’t mind them. What they’ve done here today is in fact nothing out of the ordinary.”

It seemed my suspicions had been spot on. The reason the other four mages had seemed to be getting ready to perform some sort of ritual was because that was exactly what they’d been up to. Specifically, they’d been getting ready to perform a ritual that would indoctrinate Fran into their organisation.

Fran would’ve been become one of their members had she accepted the medal she was offered.

“They won’t use magic to bind you in any which way, but I can say for certain that they would have continued to bother you going forward had you joined their ranks.”

In other words, it was basically a scam. They planned to claim that we’d become one of their members through the act of going through with the ritual so long as we accepted the medal regardless of whether or not we knew what accepting it entailed.

“Even though being tricked?”

Their actions didn’t really seem to make sense. It seemed like there was a good chance of their actions pissing off the people they indoctrinated. Though that, in and of itself, wasn’t really too much of a problem, it could turn into one should they attempt to scam a more powerful, reputable mage. It seemed like a series of actions that could very quickly and easily damage their reputation.

“Their awareness of their actions is precisely what makes them as repulsive as they are. The trick they just used on you is one they only ever attempt to use on talented children. They probably thought it would work on you because they assumed you were as naive as you are young...”

They were clearly aware and making use of the fact that the average child wouldn’t attempt to deal with the situation by force.

In other words, they forced children into their organisation by flattering them and then using the fact that they'd completed a ritual as a sort of foot in the door in order to get them to do their bidding.

"There are many Magician's Guilds out there, but none are as terrible and infamous as the Aiwass. Their methods are almost as shady as their goal, world domination. They may as well be an underground organisation, and likely wanted to recruit you after seeing the extent of your strength."

"Understood."

"Please make sure you stay prudent, Fran. You'll be getting all sorts of attention from here on out."

"Nn. Thanks."

"We should probably deal with these idiots one way or another. How do you think we should go about it?"

"B-By 'these idiots,' are you perhaps referring to us!? You dare despite being an adventurer, a simple minded brute willing to immediately resort to violence!?"

Though I did admit that there were a good number of adventurers that acted like that, I felt like he was stereotyping us. It didn't take anything more than just looking at Fermus to recognize the fact that he was civilized. Saying that he was an idiot just because he was an adventurer was flat out unreasonable.

"What? So you think there's something wrong with me calling someone that attempts to force his ideals onto others without considering the consequences an idiot?"

"Haaah!? How dar-"

I apologized to Fermus in my heart. His efforts were appreciated, but ultimately in vain as Fran was kinda the type of adventurer that tended to immediately resort to violence. That applied all the more to people that tried to mess with her. She simply couldn't stand them.

The catgirl's straight kick knocked Grakma onto his back.

“Ugrahhhh...”

Fran hadn't put too much force into the attack. She'd purposefully held back because she'd only been intending on knocking him over.

However, it caused him to collapse and start rolling back and forth, disheveling his clothes in the process.

[Wow, he's weak.]

“Nn.”

Fran's eyes widened in shock, an act I hadn't actually seen in quite some time. She'd been planning on showing him hell, but he'd kinda already fallen over after just a single tap. Honestly, I almost wanted to say it was a bit of a letdown.

“W-What are you doing, Milady!?”

“Whyever would you perform such a savage act!?”

“Bit pissed off.”

“T-That fails to justify your actions, Milady!”

Fran liked being an adventurer. She also really like many of her peers, namely people like Amanda and Erza. She would've attacked the man regardless of Fermus' claims and his relation thereto.

“Shit! Let's bounc... wait, what!?”

“I can't move!”

“Fuck!”

“You won't be able to get away. You're far too weak to escape my threads and their bindings.”

Fermus' strings sure did seem handy. He was able to use them to fully restrain all five of the magicians. They were all rendered incapable of movement.

“When?”

“Threads were a type of weapon initially developed for use in espionage. They’re much more effective in ambushes than they are in head on conflict.”

“Understood.”

Thinking about it, Fermus was right. His weapon wasn’t one suited to combat in an arena. He was much more powerful in something as tight in terms of space as a dungeon. He’d be able to easily kite with traps and whatnot. I could totally see us getting totally screwed over because we happened to stumble into a huge mass of threads in a tight corridor.

“Though, I doubt I would be able to defeat you even if the circumstances were tilted in my favour.”

“Why?”

“The incredibly powerful attack you finished me off with isn’t one I’d be able to defend against.”

The issue with what he suggested was that the combination we’d used wasn’t one we’d always be able to use. As a result, we were left unsatisfied. We wanted to get strong enough to be able to beat him by rushing him head on.

“Right, so back to what we were saying. What do you think we should do with them?”

“Not sure?”

“My suggestion would be for us to leave them to the Adventurer’s Guild.”

“Good idea?”

“I think so. I don’t see why the guild wouldn’t move to defend an adventurer as powerful as yourself from another organisation.”

I mean, I guess we could, especially seeing as how Fermus was recommending it. I was kinda tempted to head over to the guild and start showing their members their places,

but we didn't have the time for that.

"Then will leave to guild."

"I guess we should take them inside then."

"Wait bit first."

"Are you going to do something to them?"

"Nn. Administering punishment."

And so, Fran ended up slogging each of the men in the gut before dragging them inside the guild.

Much to my surprise, Dias was glad to hear what'd happened. I knew he was going to be able to deal with the situation without much issue, but I hadn't expected him to be literally jumping for joy.

"This is just perfect! They've picked a fight with us, and in doing so, given us more than just an excuse to completely wipe them out!"

Dias glanced at his subordinates, a signal that caused them to approach before taking the mages we'd caught away.

Chapter 219

Another Group Approaches

“Fermus. Thanks.”

“It’s no problem. I only decided to help because I just so happened to have something similar happen to me in the past.”

“Similar? Also almost tricked by Magician’s Guild?”

“Not exactly, but I did have my fair share of unpleasant experiences because I garnered too much attention.”

Apparently Fermus, like us, had stood out ever since he was young. Namely, he’d managed to win one of Ulmutt’s tournaments in his youth.

As a result, he was approached by magicians, mercenaries, nobles, merchants, and underground organisations. The individuals and groups that tried to solicit him would often refuse to back off even if he denied them, and sometimes even attempt to resort to force.

“I’m sure the same will happen to you.”

“How to deal with?”

“My approach was just to flee. I wandered from place to place in order to keep them from somehow making me go along with their demands.”

The dragon hunter’s coping method was honestly a pretty good one. There was no way the people that wanted to solicit him would be able to keep up, especially if he was careful about covering his tracks.

“Though, I ultimately ended up having Dias solve my problems for me.”

“Dias?”

“Yeah. The two of us had always gotten along, in part because we’re in the same age range. He’d already become guildmaster back then, so I just had him agree to call me his aide so I could use his name and reputation to deny the people that approached me.”

Dias’ position as Guildmaster made it so the very mention of his name was enough to cause most lesser nobles to back off. Having Dias’ support made Fermus’ life much easier.

“It seems to me that you’ve drawn even more attention than I had, so you may end up having to deal with some really difficult people. I’m confident you’ll be able to crush all the greedy criminal syndicates that come after you, but, the same can’t be said for the nobility. Dealing with them the wrong way could potentially lead to something that ultimately devolves into an international dispute.”

The last little bit Fermus tagged on came off as personal, and as a result, was highly convincing.

“First hand experience?”

“Hahaha. Yeah, I happened to get into a little bit of a fight with a noble from another country and ultimately ended up leaving my name in their records.”

“Just because refusal?”

“Well... he was acting in a bit too demanding a manner for my taste, so I ended up “interacting” with him and about 50 of his subordinates...”

“Killed?”

“No, no, I just made it so they needed to see a doctor immediately. The issue came from the fact that the person in question happened to be related to royalty.”

Yeah, I could see why that’d end up pissing off an entire country. There was no way they could just let something like that happen and not react unless they wanted to lose face.

“Dealt with how?”

“Oh, you know, nothing special. All I did was subdue and capture everyone that went after me before finally having a face to face meeting with the country’s king, albeit one scheduled in the middle of the night.”

So I’m guessing that means he threatened him? I mean, I get he’s strong, but like, that doesn’t exactly sound like something he, or anyone for that matter, could get away with.

“Honestly, it was something only made possible because the country was a weak and uninfluential one. Even their most powerful citizens were weaker than me. There’s no way I could possibly pull off a stunt like that if faced with a country like the Kingdom of Kranzel.”

“I see.”

“So the thing I was actually trying to say is that the best thing you could possibly do is fall back on the Adventurer’s Guild and people like Amanda, who you know you can trust, if you happen to run into any trouble.”

“Nn. Why Amanda?”

“Oh, I’m guessing you must not know then. Many of the children that grow up in Amanda’s orphanages end up becoming outstanding adventurers. They say she would be able to amass an army powerful enough to wipe a small country off the map so long as made use of her connections.”

What the hell!?

Amanda’s connections were way more impressive than we’d been expecting them to be.

“Amanda, amazing.”

“She’s got an incredible backing, and is a force to be reckoned with even if she doesn’t bother venturing onto the battlefield herself. She’s the whole reason the Reidosians haven’t picked a fight with Kranzel.”

I had no way of knowing how Amanda ran the orphanages she had set up all over the

place, or what she taught those that attended them. However, I was still able to see why it would be reasonable for the children that she raised to look up to her and her choice of career. My assumption was that she probably offered at least a bit of training, because that being true would in turn make everything click. Her instruction likely led the children she supported to develop solid foundations, which in turn ultimately allowed them to grow into outstanding adventurers.

“Though, I think you’ll be fine regardless, especially seeing as how the Beastkin’s Country has your back.”

“Beastkin’s country has back?”

“Wait, you weren’t working for them?”

“No.”

“I noticed that you’d watched the finals together with the Beast Lord, so I’d assumed that you were in his employ... If that’s not the case, then I guess he’s probably just taken a sort of liking to you.”

“Really?”

“Really. I think the reason he was willing to appear in public with you is because he wanted to keep other countries from investing you in their interests.”

Fermus continued after a light nod.

“My beastkin acquaintances have told me that most of the other beastkin have a rather favourable impression of you. They also seem to think that they could potentially deepen their bond with the Beast Lord if they demonstrate that they can get along with you. The way I see it, you’ve more or less already become one of the Beastkin country’s associates.”

He was right. With the way things were going, I wouldn’t actually be too surprised if we ultimately ended up siding with the Beastkin’s Country. We’d basically committed ourselves to visiting because the Beast Lord had made it so he owed Fran a favour. He’d also made himself seem like someone we could interact with going forward.

It was almost like the Beast Lord had orchestrated everything so that Fran would be

more inclined to pay his country a visit. That said, I felt like he himself wasn't actually capable of constructing such a meticulous plan. It was instead likely derived from advice given to him by Royce or Roche.

That said, the relationship we currently shared with the Beast Lord was more so like one that focused around the act of give and take, in which we exchanged mutual benefits.

"Whoops. I got a bit too caught up in conversing with you. I need to go."

"Thanks."

"Do stop by my store some time if you ever decide to check in on Barbra. I've started doing research on a recipe that involves the use of curry."

"High expectations."

"Great. I'll make sure I fulfill them."

Fermus gave one last bow before making an exit.

[You know, I'd really rather not keep running into people like the mages we just met.]

"Nn."

I almost felt like I jinxed it, as someone once again called out us right about where we reached the place we met Grakma and his goons.

"Hey, you, girl. Hold on."

"Nn?"

"Yes, I'm talking to you."

A party of four approached us, with a man dressed like a swordsman taking up the lead. His appearance immediately caused all the adventurers around us to react and start muttering to each other.

"Dude, check that out. It's Celldio."

“Why’s he here?”

“Tsk. Even just seeing his face pisses me the hell off.”

“Here I was thinking today was going to be a good day. Well, there goes that.”

The mood almost seemed to instantly plummet as he showed his face. It seemed he was the type of guy most other adventurers disliked.

His appearance itself wasn’t what seemed to have repulsed them, as he’d dressed himself up neatly and looked exactly as you’d expect a knight.

General Information

Name: Celldio Lesspus.

Age: 30

Species: Human

Class: Magic Sword Knight

State: Normal

Status Level: 40/99

HP: 409

MP: 398

STR: 207

VIT: 199

AGI: 167

INT: 201

MGC: 190

DEX: 167

Skills

Intimidation: Lv 3

Chant Shortening: Lv 3

Riding: Lv 7

Fear Resistance: Lv 4

Sword Techniques: Lv 7

Sword Arts: MAX

Divine Sword Arts: Lv 2
Extortion: Lv 6
Command: Lv 4
Purification Magic: Lv 2
Resistance to Mental Abnormalities: Lv 5
Mental Harm Resistance: Lv 5
Elemental Blade: Lv 6
Magic Detection: Lv 3
Connoisseur: Lv 8
Leaves Good Impressions on the Opposite Sex
Opposite Sex Attraction
Orc Killer
Vigour Manipulation
Curse Nullification

Unique Skills

Weapon Control

Titles

Orc Killer
Ladykiller
Viscount
Extortionist
Elixir Addict
A Ranked Adventurer

Equipment

Pegasus Sword
Basilisk Sword
Holy Silver Armour of Light
Hexagonal Deer King's Mantle
Dimensional Ring
Pendant of Life

He was decently strong, but not anything too outstanding. His party members were the same. They were all at least level 30, and had fairly decent stats. They had a pretty good balance going too, with a swordsman, a shield-bearer, a mage, and a rogue. That said, Celldio, the guy that seemed like the party's leader, really didn't seem worthy of

his A ranked title. He was weaker than both Jean and Colbert, who were still both B rankers, so there wasn't even really any point in comparing him to someone like Amanda. I mean, had a pretty versatile build, but still...

Celldio spoke in a pompous sounding voice as I looked and thought over his stats.

"You."

His voice was completely devoid of amicability. It really didn't take him saying more than just a single word for me to understand why none of the other adventurers liked him. Dude was definitely a total douchebag, and the type that looked down on other people to boot.

Both his skills and titles seemed to reference the fact that he was the type you wouldn't want your daughter to hang around. That, combined with his good looking face, and the fact that he was a viscount, immediately made me not want him associating with Fran in any which way.

[This dude looks like he's both a noble and a scumbag. It'd probably be best for you to just ignore him and move on.]

(Got it.)

We planned to slip right past him and casually wander off, but we failed.

"Hey! Wait!"

The skirt chaser moved himself in Fran's way before continuing to call out to her in an arrogant manner. Looking at him up close made me realize he wasn't just a good looking guy, but rather, an incredibly good looking guy. As a result, I started to hate on him even more.

"You're Fran, right? The Black Lightning Princess?"

He clearly only called out to her because he knew exactly who she was.

"C ranker. Fran."

"Good, then I have the right person. I don't really think I need to bother introducing

myself, but I will anyway. I'm Celldio Lesspas, A ranked adventurer."

"Nn? Never heard of."

"What? You can't possibly be serious, can you?"

"Nn."

"Huh. You really don't do your research, do you?"

Wow, what a cunt. The dude immediately assumed that we didn't do enough research just because we didn't know who he was. His clear overconfidence only made me hate him all the more.

I began wondering what he wanted. There was no way he would go out of his way to call out to Fran and name himself if he didn't have something in mind.

Chances were, he probably either wanted to invite them to his party or ask her to do something. Either way, I didn't really feel like what came out of his mouth would end up being anything decent.

"Need what?"

"Give me your magic sword."

Chapter 220

Celldio

“Need What?”

“Give me your magic sword.”

Uh, what? Like, actually, what? Is this son of a bitch seriously trying to extort Fran in the middle of town with everyone around us watching?

“Nn? No. Why?”

“Because I’m an A ranked adventurer.”

“Meaning?”

“Look, you know just how amazing that sword is, right? You should know that giving it to someone like me is basically the same thing as doing the whole world a favour.”

“Don’t understand.”

“Yeah, yeah, now stop being so selfish and fork it over.”

“Nn?”

The fact that he was ragging on about the world while attempting to blatantly extort us caused Fran to freeze and stare straight at him. Fran probably would’ve already cut the dude in half if he was trying to bullshit us, but we could tell that he actually thought what he said. The dude was so full of himself that he actually thought he was doing a good deed.

“So she’s going to be his next victim? Man, must suck to be her.”

“Then go stop him!”

“Hell no dude, are you insane!? Celldio’s fucked up in the head, but his skills are the real deal. Wait, why’s he in Ulmutt anyway?”

“I’m pretty sure it was because Forrund left him out in the streets half dead when the two met in Barbra.”

“Right, makes sense. But man, I really didn’t expect to have to look at that ugly mug of his after making the journey all the way over.”

“Oh yeah, and don’t forget, the girl he’s trying to mess with right now is the Black Lightning Princess. I’m pretty sure things aren’t gunna go the way they usually do.”

It seemed that what Celldio was doing right now was nothing out of the norm for him. As a result, many of the adventurers in our vicinity began giving Fran looks of pity.

“I’ll pay you as much as you want. I’ll give you so much cash you’ll be able to retire. I’m sure adventuring isn’t the type of business a little girl like you wants to be a part of. And as for me? I’ll be making good use of that sword of yours.”

The swordsman thumped himself on the chest as he spoke, almost as if to say that she could leave all her adventuring to him.

“I’m sure that’s what your sword wants too.”

“Not possible.”

“You say that, but me? I know. I know how swords feel. I can understand them. That sword doesn’t think it’s something a little girl should be wielding. Come on, why are you hesitating? I’m giving you a chance to stop adventuring, a chance to turn yourself back into just another girl.”

“Already satisfied. Mind own business.”

“Oh man, you sure are ignorant. Let me guess, you just don’t want to give the sword to someone else because you’re feeling sentimental? I mean, I’ll acknowledge that it’s got quite some value to it, but, you’re not thinking. What a sad life you must’ve led not to be able to consider all the benefit that giving your sword to me will bring you. I guess that must mean I’ll need to punish you a bit to make you understand. I know you see a whip right now, but don’t you fret. I’m only going to whip you out of love.”

What bugged me the most about all this was that Celldio had yet to speak a single lie. The Principle of Falsehood had judged everything single last thing he'd said to be what he believed to be the truth.

The lunatic thought that I wanted him to use me, that giving me to him would benefit the world as a whole, and that whipping a young girl for the sake of discipline was an act of love.

I couldn't help but feel disgusted to the point that I wanted to vomit despite not even having a stomach to begin with. He was a fucking creep. He didn't really come off as either mad or eccentric. You couldn't really discern him from any other, less fucked up person from a glance. But still, something about him was just... *off*. I'd much rather a goblin use me than him. He disgusted me so much that I felt like physiologically repulsed.

[God, he's grossing me out so much I think I'm getting goosebumps.]

Bloodlust was starting to well up from within Fran each and every single time Celldio opened his mouth. It seemed she'd finally gotten over the initial shock and realized that he wanted to take me from her.

(How to kill?)

[Uhhh, let's try not to jump the gun just yet.]

Murdering the retard and his group was honestly a simple task. They were far weaker than we were. The only thing that really caused me to stop Fran was the fact that he was a viscount. I really wasn't feeling like dealing with the aftermath that'd result from making that choice.

I considered retreating, but wrote it off because I felt like it wouldn't actually bring the incident to an end. Celldio would probably continue to pursue and bother us. As a result, I couldn't really figure out what to do.

"Now how about handing it over? I can hand you even more money if this isn't enough, but it should be. It's an amount that'll let a commoner like you get by for a few years."

The amount he'd prepared was 500k Golde.

A mere 500k Golde.

My mind almost blanked. I actually couldn't understand what he was thinking.

Did he really not understand how much I was worth? The amount he was paying wouldn't be enough to fetch him any half decent magic sword, let alone me.

“...”

His offer was so ridiculous it caused Fran to go silent out of a mix of surprise and anger. Celldio seemed to have interpreted said silence as the fact that she didn't think his offer was high enough, which in turn prompted him to reply in a sour manner.

“So you don't think that's enough...? You do know that obsessing over money turns your life into nothing more than a boring mess, right?”

He was saying something that you'd expect one reasonable adult to tell another, but, was taking advantage of the saying and warping it in a way that made it serve his purposes.

“Okay, how about this then? I'll make you one of my concubines.”

[What? W-What the fuck did this son of a bitch just say!?!]

“I mean, your face could do with a few improvements, but oh well. The honour that comes with such a position should make it worth it, right? I come from a line of marquis, so you'll be guaranteed a good life, even as just a concubine. That kind of reward makes this whole trade more than just worth it for a beastkin like you, am I right?”

[.....]

“So, how about it? You'll get be my concubine, and you'll basically be given infinite money. Sounds good, right?”

Celldio had no doubt that he was doing Fran a favour. He was, without a doubt, expecting her to thank him because he thought that he'd just given her basically the “best conditions ever.”

Ahahahahahahahaha.

So this skirt chasing pedophile wants to not only take me away from Fran, but also turn her into one of his concubines?

Thankfully, Fran herself didn't understand what the man was proposing, and ultimately ended up staring at him with a blank gaze. She probably would've more than just exploded in anger had she actually known what he was talking about.

(Master?)

[.....]

(Master? Something wrong?)

[I think I just might've come up with a pretty good idea.]

"Nn?"

[Alright, repeat after me.]

(Got it.)

Fran began relaying my words to Celldio.

"Nn. This sword chooses wielder. Can't be used by unqualified. If unqualified tries to use, will die."

"Hahaha! No worries there. I'm *special*, one of the chosen."

"Will burn scammers, poison thieves, kill villains."

We'd told him quite a bit, so I was hoping he'd back off. I was willing to call it a day after castrating and almost killing him if he was willing to stop.

"Fmph. Just hand it over already."

"Yeah, hurry it up."

“You’re being rude. Our lord is busy, and doesn’t have the time for this.”

The rogue-like guy grinned after Celldio’s two other companions encouraged Fran to hand me over.

“Milord, I think it might be better to just take the sword from her even if you have to do it through force. It seems like she’s unable to see reason.”

The fact that the viscount listened to the rogue’s words and stepped up while acting all stuck up and shit made me feel like he was manipulating the the stupid skirt chasing pedophile.

“That’s true. She’ll soon come to thank me even if she doesn’t right away.”

He drew his weapon and begin to emit an aura of bloodlust, as if to demonstrate to Fran what fate would have in store for her should she not hand me over.

I was sure Celldio’s group had watched Fran’s matches, so I didn’t quite understand why they thought they’d be able to pry me from her through the use of force. It seemed that they were either full of themselves or assumed she wouldn’t hurt Celldio because he was a noble.

“Hurry up and hand it over.”

“Really sure?”

“Of course I’m sure I want it! Now hand me the sword, girl!”

It seemed he wanted to take me from Fran regardless of the fact that we’d warned him he might die.

Well, I guess that means his life is forfeit. I couldn’t really make Fran out to be a liar, and was kinda pissed off to begin with anyways. This was basically the perfect opportunity for me to address both of those two problems at once.

The adventurers standing nearby could act as witnesses to testify that Fran had indeed warned Celldio, and that it was his own fault he died.

[Feel free to hand me to him whenever.]

“Got it. Won’t be responsible for result.”

“That’s fine. You giving me the sword is all that matters.”

And so, Fran handed me to Celldio. Him touching me caused me to feel a wave of disgust wash through my body, but I forced myself to bear with it for the time being.

It seemed that him holding me wasn’t causing the Goddess’ penalty to activate. It probably only would once he actually equipped me. That was good to know, as it meant we could at least allow other people to hold me so long as they didn’t actually try to use me as their weapon, which in turn meant we could have blacksmiths handle me and whatnot.

He would’ve automatically equipped me if he holstered me or tried to use me, but, as of right now, he was just holding me, so the Goddess’ divine retribution wouldn’t actually activate unless he consciously tried equipping me. That was how it worked back when I first met Fran, she wasn’t able to actually become my wielder until she went out of her way to think about it.

I sensed a bit of magical energy flow from Celldio to me. He was attempting to use his Weapon Control skill before actually equipping me.

However, he wasn’t able to get past my Control Nullification skill and ultimately failed. I was planning to steal the skill if I started to feel him taking control of me, but luckily, I didn’t actually have to.

All the magical energy he poured into me ended up dispersing.

“Huh? Why isn’t it...”

Celldio understood that he hadn’t managed to take control of me, but he didn’t manage to arrive at the conclusion that his skill had flat out failed, and so, he tried a bit harder to get the skill to work. I was perfectly fine with him not actually ending up equipping me. I kinda wanted to see him get smited, but I’d also kinda been wanting to be the one to do it anyways.

The first thing I did was cast Elemental Blade, specifically with the flame element.

Naturally, I'd made use of the Sorcery skill in order to pump as much magical energy in as I possibly could.

"Woah! This thing's starting to burn up."

Heh, serves you right you son of a bitch! Guess who shouldn't have assumed his Weapon Control skill would actually work?

Celldio's face twisted into a frown as a result of the sudden influx of heat.

"W-What!? Why won't this sword obey me? I'm supposed to be one of the chosen!?"

MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA MUDA! ^[1]

The fact that he thought he was special was making me laugh. His mental age was something to be scoffed at.

"W-What the fuck!? I can't let go!"

I held Celldio's hands down with Telekinesis in order to prevent him from escaping my wrath. I concentrated all the force I would've used to catapult myself on his arms in order to hold them in position, so there was no way he was going to escape even after considering that he was an A ranked adventurer.

"Gaah!"

He couldn't let go of me even though his skin was starting to burn off. I started to harass him all the more as he began panicking. Namely, I changed the shape of my guard and hilt and stabbed both into his hand while also using the Magic Poison Fang skill.

"Gaarhhh!"

His face turned a deep shade of blue as the poison began circulating through his veins. Appraising him allowed me to confirm that his state has changed to "badly poisoned." Poison hadn't actually worked on any of the people we'd been fighting lately, so I was glad it finally found a chance to shine.

"M-My Connosieur skill didn't tell me about any of this!"

Connisuer was like appraisal, but it only worked on items.

That explained why he was willing to take the bet. He'd seen my the fake stat page I had, and come to the conclusion that I didn't actually have the features Fran had described.

"Milord!"

The mage cast both Heal and Antidote on Celldio.

"Guaaaahh!? Anna, hurry up and fix me!"

"My magic isn't working...! Karam, potions!"

"A-Alright!"

Karam, the rogue, tried using several healing potions to restore Celldio, but his actions were futile. I was still giving off heat and continuing to poison him. All the damage he healed off would immediately be reapplied.

The mix of flame and poison forced Celldio to recall the words Fran had spoke to him earlier.

"Get away! Arggg! why can't I let go of this sword!? Why!?"

Namely, Celldio remembered the word death. A wave of panic washed over him and dyed his screams in fear.

But it didn't matter. This was what he got for trying to make Fran his concubine.

The viscount had thought his own actions to be just, but, truth be told, he'd been doing nothing but extorting people and robbing them. He was a criminal that committed the acts time and time again. There was a good chance he'd also made use of his family's influence in order to abduct otherwise unwilling women.

I knew that he might also be a victim, one deceived by his companions. He was an elixir addict, meaning someone might've made him lose his mind from overdosing on drugs, but I didn't care. I didn't care what reasons he had, nor whether or not he himself had

suffered.

I had no intentions of forgiving him regardless.

“Gaaaaahhhh!”

Chapter 221

The Goddess' Retribution

“Gaaaaaahh!”

Celldio's face twisted in agony. His fingers had been burnt to point where they'd blackened, and his hand was filled with holes because I'd covered my handle in poison tipped spikes.

Despite that, my rage had yet to abate. He hadn't suffered nearly enough to make up for the fact that he tried to make Fran one of his concubines.

They might've even taken her away by force if she was still as weak as when we'd only just met.

Imagining him forcing himself on her made me more than mad enough to tear him to bits.

I once again changed my form so I could better damage him.

“Hggiiiiiihfff!”

I made the thorns coming out of my grip grow and squirm around like a living creature as they snaked up his arm. I made sure to half retract the thorns as they moved before jabbing them into him over and over again.

“Aarrghghghghgh!”

The pain caused him to lose control of his body as it began to spasm. His party members tried to heal him, but they weren't actually able to help.

Much to my surprise, Celldio's servants were actually serious about trying to save him. It went without saying that they tried to avoid touching me, but they weren't particularly adamant about it.

Either way, I felt a sense of gratification as I watched him drip with tears, snot, and other body fluids.

I'd really wanted to figure out the exact sort of punishment the Goddess would administer, but the viscount wasn't really showing any signs of actually wanting to equip me. I was getting a bit sick of letting him hold me, so I started contemplating whether or not I should just use my Telekinetic Catapult to finish him off.

"Shit... Shit...!"

[How about trying to equip it?]

I decided to give it one last shot and started coercing him with telepathy. I was expecting him to either go along with what I said or write the thoughts I conveyed to him off as a figment of his imagination.

Naturally, I was going to promptly cut him down if he chose to do the latter.

"Haa... Haahh... That's right! I haven't actually tried equipping this damned thing!"

Perfect.

"Arrrrghhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Celldio let loose a howl of pure pain that sent shivers down the spines of the people around us the moment he tried to equip me. It was the kind that echoed through to the very depths of one's soul.

The sight of him turning his eyes towards the heavens as he continued to scream was so odd that it caused both his servants and the adventurers around us to freeze in place.

The scene persisted for several seconds before the person that caused it finally broke the silence.

"P-Please no! Please forgive me! Argghghgahghgahh!"

Streams of blood erupted from Celldio's eyes, ears, and mouth the moment after he let loose one last scream.

And then he fell. His knees buckled as they gave way and caused his body to collapse.

“ ... ”

The thud of him falling flat on his face was the last sound to precede a silence so heavy it could only be described as painful.

“Nn. Unqualified.”

The only individual that remained capable of movement was Fran. She walked over to Celldio's corpse, wiped off my handle, and picked me up.

Only then did the crowd finally come back to life. The people around us began to scream in panic. I couldn't blame them. Celldio was someone no one liked, and he also wasn't actually all that strong, but he'd been an A ranked adventurer nonetheless. In other words, the people around us had processed the sight as that of an A ranker meeting an instant death.

I had to say, the Goddess' retribution differed quite a bit from what I'd been expecting. My guess had been that she'd strike him with a lightning bolt that came out of the blue seeing as how the punishment that befell people who didn't know I was bound was supposedly something along the lines of an electric shock. The sight of Celldio's death seemed to illustrate that the death-related punishment did something to the insides of the target's head.

“H-H-H-How dare you!? How dare you murder Milord!?”

“Ignored advice given. Killed self.”

“W-What kind of excuse is that!? If you knew that would happen, then why didn't you insist that he stop!?”

The man that approached Fran was the one that'd been carrying the shield. He looked like a knight, and honestly, probably was. If I had to guess, I'd say that he likely served Celldio's parents.

“Burnt, poisoned, died. Clearly scammer, thief, villain.”

“Y-You dare!? Your words equate to you insulting his household’s, a marquis’ honour!”

“Only speaking truth.”

“You little shit!”

The shield-bearing knight lowered a hand to his sword as if to indicate that he wanted to fight us. However, he was stopped before he could draw it.

“That’s enough. Everyone here has clearly seen that it was the viscount’s fault and not the girl’s. I will have to step in and take you on if you wish to fault her any further.”

“A-Are you blind, Colbert!? Master Celldio was both an A ranked adventurer and a viscount!

Her actions clearly functioned as treason against both the state and the adventurer’s guild.”

“Well, I don’t quite know what you saw, but I only witnessed a swindler get what he deserved after attempting to extort her out of her weapon.”

“W-Whatever are yo-”

“Are you really still going to keep that facade up even after running all the way to Ulmutt with your tail between your legs? I’d even go as far as to say that it was likely you lot that egged the viscount on in the first place.”

“Enough of your preaching! You can’t deny that girl murdered Milord!”

“That simply is not true. He died because he was afflicted by the sword’s curse. She warned him of it, and he ignored it, so all the fault lies with him, and he only got what he deserved. Are you incapable of comprehending the incredible number of people that served to witness the events that just unfolded?”

All the adventurers around us immediately began glaring at Celldio’s party members. They didn’t seem to be willing to back off, so they returned it and caused the situation to devolve into a staring contest.

A heavy mood began to propagate throughout the area.

“You lot sure are kicking up a fuss. Did something happen?”

Dias spoke as he exited the guild. It seemed that the all the commotion had caused enough noise for it to reach his ears.

The first to respond to Dias’ question was the shield-bearing knight.

“G-Guildmaster! Milord was killed by their hands. Adminster capital punishment immediately!”

“Huh, quite a mouth you’ve got for a B ranker. Tell me, are you trying to give me orders?”

“W-What...!? Are you kidding me!? You want to refuse!? This is a murder case, one that involves the death of one of Marquis Ashtonah’s potential successors! Obeying my orders should be nothing short of your duty, adventurer!”

Nobles were normally considered to be of a higher class than the guild’s staff members, so it seemed the knight had expected Dias to comply.

But he didn’t. The old guildmaster instead responded with a scornful laugh.

“While I didn’t bear witness to the event, I was filled in on exactly what had happened. Let me ask you something. Who’s fault do you think all this is? I’d really like you to mull that statement over, digest it, and shut up. Did your parents not tell you that all thieves start out as liars?”

“Y-You... you’re calling me a liar?”

“Yup. Though, I guess a bit of investigation is indeed in order seeing as how I didn’t see the event first hand.”

Celldio’s followers seemed to interpret Dias’ words as a chance, as they immediately began appealing to him and attempting to convince him that Fran tricked Celldio in order to murder him.

I did trust Dias, but, I didn’t feel like I could say for sure that he wouldn’t take the marquis’ household’s side. He was a guildmaster, a member of a larger organisation

that ultimately did have to make that sort of decision from time to time. To that end, I steeled myself for combat while awaiting his response.

“I’ll have to do a bit more investigating in order to figure out the truth. Colbert, Forrund, could the two of you take them down to the dungeon for the time being?”

“Sure.”

“Consider it done.”

Forrund suddenly appeared behind Celldio’s party and caused all three remaining individuals to widen their eyes in fear. It seemed that whatever he did to them had left them with some pretty deep mental scars.

“Make sure you strip them of their equipment, handcuff them, and gag them. Be as strict as you need to, keeping in mind that they’re both witnesses and suspects for a viscount’s murder.”

“W-What!? You have to be kidding me! Stop this, stop this immediately!”

“Why’re you letting that brat free!? You should at least do the same to her!”

“Yeah, this isn’t fair!”

“Don’t worry, she’s under arrest as well. However, I’ll be taking her up to my office as opposed to the dungeon because I’ll be seeing her first.”

Dias had linked arms with Fran. She didn’t bother resisting, and instead, simply spoke a line in her usual tone of voice.

“Oh no. Getting caught.”

“See? I have her detained.”

Celldio’s party members once again began kicking up a fuss the moment they saw that happen, but they weren’t really able to influence Dias in any which way.

“T-This is unreasonable! How could you treat us like t-”

“Unreasonable? Didn’t I just tell you you’re being detained as both witnesses and suspects? Why would it be reasonable for me to let either of those two types of individuals out of my grasp?”

“Damned commoner! You dare act in this manner just because you’ve managed to get yourself a half-decent position!? You’ll regret this! I’ll make sure of it!”

“T-That’s right! The marquis will get you for this!”

“You’ll pay for this!”

Forrund took the three away as they continued to shout.

“He thinks he’s going to make me pay? Hah, funny. I don’t know why he even thinks he’ll be getting out of that dungeon alive.”

Dias muttered something incredibly sinister under his breath before turning back to Fran and smiling in his usual manner while pulling on her arm.

“Okay, how about you give me a quick rundown of everything that just happened?”

“Got it.”

“Oh yeah, and you don’t really have to worry much about anything seeing as how everyone here happened to witness what just happened, right?”

The adventurers around us immediately responded to Dias calling out to them.

“Hell yeah. We know what’s up.”

“I dunno about you, but watching Celldio die just made my day.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll testify that it was them and not you!”

Their many responses almost seemed to resemble the cheers we’d been showered with back at the arena.

“Hahaha, it looks like you’re just popular as your nickname suggests. Though, that should come as no surprise given how people always love a strong, young, good-

looking female adventurer. You know, I would probably be overthrown if I had you locked up with Celldio's party members."

Chapter 222

Celldio's Backstory

The guild's staff members retrieved Celldio's corpse as his servants were escorted to the guild's dungeon.

We, on the other hand, accompanied Dias so we could tell him exactly what had happened.

One of the female employees brought us a cup of tea as we arrived at the guildmaster's office.

"Oh man! Someone's finally gone and done it! You have no idea how badly I wanted this to happen."

Dias let go of Fran's arm the moment he closed the door behind him and immediately both bowed and began singing her praise.

"Thank you very much!"

"Very happy?"

"Celldio's group was a tumour that Kranzel's Adventurer's Guild needed removed. I really can't thank you enough helping us get rid of them."

The fact that Dias went as far as calling Celldio a tumour really served to evidence just how much the viscount was disliked.

"Did you appraise him?"

[I did.]

"Then I'm guessing you must've thought he was rather weak for an A ranker?"

Dias' speculation had hit the nail on the head. I was convinced that there was no way

Celldio was anything more than a B ranker in terms of strength.

I'd thought that he'd made it all the way up for a reason opposite the one for which Fran was denied a promotion. In other words, I'd assumed that he'd been classified as an A ranker because of a series of outstanding accomplishments or something similar.

But apparently that wasn't the case.

"A ranked adventurers are effectively heroes. Strength is a requirement that can't be forgone or ignored, though you're right in assuming that one also needs a series of achievements in order to qualify."

What Dias meant was that it wasn't possible for someone weak to become an A ranker regardless the deeds they had to their name, a fact that seemed to contradict the reality presented by Celldio's status.

"Despite our strict requirements, the lunatic you just dealt with still managed to get himself deemed an A ranker. Can you guess why?"

[What you've said so far seems to insinuate that A rankers have to undergo some sort of combat trial. I don't really see how he could've possibly managed to worm his way past it.]

"You see, there are actually four requirements one needs to fulfill in order to be recognized as an A ranked adventurer. The first is strength, the second is having significant accomplishments, the third is for the person to have done enough for the guild, and the fourth is to be acknowledged by at least 15 different guildmasters."

The requirements were strict, with the last seeming almost borderline impossible.

"Or at least that is how it would work under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, skills happen to make him capable of circumventing our prerequisites."

"Skills?"

"Let me rephrase. How many female guildmasters do you think this country happens to have?"

His question kicked my brain into gear and allowed me to figure out what he was

getting at.

[I'm guessing you're talking about the skills he had that worked against the opposite sex? I'm assuming that ladykiller title he's got probably helped in some way too.]

"That's right. He sank his fangs into seven different female guildmasters."

The "Leaves Good Impressions on the Opposite Sex" skill seemed to be one that brought about goodwill, whereas the "Opposite Sex Attraction" skill functioned as a sort of charm.

His ladykiller title made it so that any women that happened to have even the slightest bit of a good impression of him would instantly be smitten.

"He was able to win them over with even the slightest mention of love."

[And that's how he got himself promoted all the way up?]

"It was more like they tried offering him. One of his supporters was a lady 40 years his senior, one with quite a bit of influence."

Gross...

Wait, how'd he pull off the whole A rank thing with only seven backers?

"The rest he bribed, pressured using his parents' influence, and made promises to. He used all sorts of methods in order to achieve his goal."

"Guild still holding up?"

[That sounds pretty concerning to me.]

"Sorry. Guildmasters are people too. We're imperfect, and some of us are just flat out scum."

[Yeah, I know what you're trying to get at.]

The politicians and police officers back on Earth weren't exactly guilt free either. A guildmaster failing to fulfill its duty seemed to be something along the same lines as

that.

“Fortunately, I can say that I’ve put in a lot of work and made it so that all but three of the guildmasters that approved Celldio have been deprived of their positions.”

[Wait, he’s still an A rank despite the fact that most of his supporters have been replaced?]

“Unfortunately, not even us guildmasters are capable of doing too much to A rankers. Individuals recognized as A ranked adventurers are given increased liberties alongside a right to give voice to their own opinions. We have to keep in mind that rescinding a promotion we granted is an act that would put a stain on the guild’s honour.”

That seemed quite troublesome given that a good number of guildmasters seemed to be obsessed with precedents.

“I’ve been keeping an eye on Celldio’s group ever since he was first granted his rank in hopes of finding an incident that would allow me to derank him. Unfortunately, there never was one.”

[But doesn’t he extort people on a regular basis?]

“His actions are technically classified as legal. He goes overboard, but he does still pay as opposed to just running away with his golde. To make matters worse, none of his targets ever end up trying to prosecute him.”

[Huh? Really? Why wouldn’t they? Doesn’t he jack their weapons?]

“You only think that way because you’re the exact type he doesn’t want to mess with. You’re strong, you’ve got quite a bit of influence, and you’ve got just the right attitude one needs to deal with him. Most C rankers would immediately yield if they found themselves confronting an A ranker that comes from a family headed by a marquis, especially if the A ranker in question happens to have a pretty bad reputation.”

That did kinda make sense. Losing one’s weapon is far better than losing one’s life, after all.

“Though, the most annoying and difficult to deal with part about that viscount was the

fact that he had too many screws loose.”

“Loose screws?”

[How exactly does that make him difficult to deal with?]

“Some magic items have the ability to detect crime. The problem is that they function off the thoughts of the people they’re used on, so they won’t respond if their targets think they’re in the legal right.”

In other words, items that could’ve normally detected crimes didn’t work on Celldio because he didn’t think he was doing anything wrong.

[Wait, but didn’t one of his titles say he was an elixir addict?]

The way it was worded kinda made him seem like some sort of druggie.

“Elixirs are often used in medical treatments, so ingesting them on a regular basis is in fact not a sin in and of itself. Some dumber nobles also consider ingesting elixirs to be a regular pastime. They don’t think of it as a crime or sin.”

That meant that catching Celldio for his addiction would also entail doing the same to every other noble that happened to be in the same boat. It seemed like something that wouldn’t go smoothly, and could potentially worsen the guild’s relationships with the country’s nobles. Going through with the idea was, all in all, a huge pain in the ass.

“Elixir?”

“Elixirs are terrifying drugs that provide powerful feelings of exhilaration to those who drink them, with the only recompense being a bit of brain damage. It’s often used by nobles and individuals that reside within royal palaces in order to turn people in power into easily manipulable puppets.”

“That’s why messed up in head?”

“I think so. Celldio was still capable of speaking and thinking, but he seemed to have lost the ability to reason. His symptoms make it seem like he was made to drink a very specific amount of the drug on a regular basis.”

[Now that you mention it, it did kinda feel like his party members were manipulating him.]

“Masterminds, servants?”

“Hmm... that’s hard to say. If it were up to me, I’d say the blame likely lies with the marquis himself.”

[You sure? Wouldn’t the marquis actually end up losing face if Celldio causing trouble? The public would probably end up accusing the marquis of drugging him if they found out why he lost his mind, right?]

Plus, manipulating one’s own son didn’t quite seem like anything that would ultimately prove beneficial.

“I’d say that the marquis’ choice was actually a good one for the sole reason that Celldio had once been genuine scum. I think he’s guilty of about 10 different cases of assault, rape and robbery alone. He covered them all up, either through the use of his household’s power, or the authority that belonged to the female guildmaster he had wrapped around his finger at the time. And as for any that accused to oppose him?”

Dias took his thumb and dragged it across his neck.

[Wait, are you saying he’d have them assassinated?]

“Exactly. His father is a marquis, so it’s only natural for him to be familiar with darker dealings, hence why he’s better off in his current state. The only drawback is that anyone that talks to him can tell that he’s a lunatic.”

So I guess that means the marquis drugged his son to more or less make it seem like he had reformed?

“There’s that, but you can’t forget that having an A ranked adventurer as a puppet is something that comes with an incredible large number of benefits. Nobles normally aren’t supposed to be able to issue orders to the adventurer’s guild, but Celldio’s father could do exactly that through him. As a result, the marquis had effectively bolstered his own forces to unfathomable heights.”

It seemed that many adventurers were willing to abide by an A ranker’s will even if

they happened to dislike the A ranker in question.

[Alright, I'm following so far, but why was drugging Celldio a necessary part of all this? Couldn't the marquis have just ordered him around instead?]

"He seemed to have come to the conclusion that Celldio, as he had been in the past, was far too stupid to actually become an A ranker. There's also the fact that Celldio probably wouldn't have obeyed his father after ranking up even if he had somehow managed to do it on his own. To the marquis, drugging his son was the quicker, simpler solution."

Hearing Dias' explanation made me almost want to immediately exclaim that the marquis' heart was black as coal. Getting involved with the nobility appeared to be something we wanted to avoid by all means.

"Marquis Ashtonah had probably never viewed Celldio as anything more than a disposable pawn to begin with given that he was an illegitimate child. Keeping Celldio around was detrimental if anything, given how his very presence would be more than enough to start a power struggle."

I was able to understand Dias' explanation, but I couldn't quite accept it as something I found reasonable. That, of course, wasn't to say that I didn't have any questions.

[So why did his subordinates encourage him to extort people? Wouldn't it be a better idea to just have him kept in check given all they shit they had to go through to make him an A ranker?]

Celldio's reputation probably would've been much better had he not started stepping out of line. He probably would've had much more influence over the guild too.

"That's something I've been wondering as well. The rumour is that they've been looking for Godblades. The Weapon Control skill he had made him rather well suited for doing exactly that."

[So you think they've been going around extorting people in hopes of potentially coming across a Godblade?]

"Again, I don't really know the answer to that myself. All I can say for certain is that they do have some sort of reason."

One of the guild's employees knocked on the door right as Dias finished speaking. The employee's timing was pretty decent, so he immediately replied by telling them they could enter.

"Guildmaster, could I direct your attention to something?"

"What?"

"We've managed to retrieve several items from within Celldio's Dimensional Ring."

The employee presented a small vial of liquid alongside what appeared to be some sort of document.

"The bottle contains elixir as evidenced by its contents not shaking about as the container moves around. This document, on the other hand... seems to be a list of Godblades?"

The information pertaining to Godblades caught my interest, so I had Fran reposition herself so that I could peak at it. It contained a list of names as well as several drawings and descriptions that could potentially allow one to better recognize the blades in question.

The exact items listed differed slightly from the ones we saw on the document Rumina had showed us.

Was the one we were looking at now more up to date or something?

"I'm surprised you managed to open his item box. Something like this would normally come with a sort of security measure."

"We were immediately told how to open the box after Erza began his interrogations."

"So which one spilled the beans, exactly?"

"The rogue."

"Makes sense. Bad boys are Erza's type, after all."

Oh god. Oh my god. Erza, what the hell did you do to that poor man!? I kinda wanted to ask, but I also really didn't want to know. The way the staff member was acting clearly demonstrated that it was, at the very least, a method outside the norm.

"Heya Fran!"

Erza showed up the moment I swore never to piss him off. Seeing him caused me to immediately force myself to forget the fact that he seemed to be basking in some sort of afterglow.

"Good work, Erza. Have you learned anything?"

"Mhm. I've got quite the bit of intel for you. I managed to squeeze a whole lot of info out of him after thoroughly exhausting him. It seemed they didn't think that the sword's curse would work because they thought Celldio's Weapon Control skill would let him circumvent it."

It seemed that was why they egged him on instead of stopping him.

"Oh, and they didn't really say this explicitly, but, it seems they're working under Marquis Ashtonah's orders."

"Did you happen to find out why they wanted to deprive Fran of her weapon?"

"Mhm. Totally."

"Want to know."

"It's a weally stupid reason. They were really rotten on the inside, but A ranked adventurers nonetheless. They had a lot of information the guild normally kept secret from the public, so the marquis had ordered them to go looking for Godblades. But they ran into a pretty big problem, one they sowed for themselves. Funny enough, Celldio ended up a bit too broken and immediately got fixated on every magic sword he came across. They weren't actually able to control him."

I couldn't help but agree with Erza. The fact that Celldio's lack of sanity had caused him to obsess over regular magic swords after being ordered to find Godblades was kinda funny in a pathetic sort of way.

Chapter 223

A Godblade's Might

Dias began to speak after seeing Erza off so he could continue interrogating Celldio's subordinates.

"It looks like we'll be able to use what we just learned to force Marquis Ashtonah into a bit of a hard spot."

"Why?"

One of his illegitimate children had gotten themselves involved in some sort of scandal. I mean, that mattered and all, but it wasn't really anything that delivered a major blow to his reputation. I couldn't see how it the event could make a high-standing noble suffer any significant consequences.

As far as I was concerned, this whole incident was Celldio's own fault to begin with. He was a druggie, one that extorted the common folk and ultimately killed himself by attempting to wield a cursed sword. Again, his actions were scandalous, but lacked impact. They weren't significant enough to mean much of anything at all to anyone with a marquis' social standing. This was only emphasized all the more by the fact that the guild was apparently already aware of the illegitimate methods Celldio had used to make himself an A ranker in the first place.

"The reason stems from his interest in and pursuit of Godblades. Godblades are so overwhelmingly powerful that they're able to repel entire armies. He would be suspected of treason if word of his intents got out."

"I see."

[But weren't there already rumours about Celldio searching for Godblades to begin with?]

"There were, but his position differs greatly from his father's, as one is an adventurer, and the other an aristocrat. It's perfectly acceptable for adventurers to seek out

Godblades. In fact, you may as well go ahead and call the act natural. Wielding a weapon that powerful can be considered a sort of universal desire those in our trade happen to share.”

I felt like we were starting to get into technicalities, but I did still understand what Dias was trying to get at. He was more or less saying that Celldio’s actions weren’t considered suspicious unless his father was also factored into the equation.

[Oh yeah, you mind showing me that list again?]

“Sure.”

The list contained many names, but failed to mention Alpha, Berserk, Ignis, Gaia or Diablo.

Apparently the reason they hadn’t been noted was because their locations were known; there was no point in having Celldio look for them.

The only one whose location we knew was Diablo, the Demon Lord’s Blade. It was somewhere in the kingdom of Fyrias, the place Prince Flut and Princess Satia, the twins we sailed with, hailed from. We didn’t actually know what the sword was capable of, but we were at least aware that it was able to allow their small kingdom to fight off the major military power known as Reidos.

Dias told us where the other four were.

The most surprising two were Ignis, the Brilliant Flameblade, and Gaia, the Earth’s Edge, as both were owned by S ranked adventurers. The guildmaster explained to us that their wielders were already extremely powerful on their own, and that the Godblades had only boosted their power levels further. The combination of their abilities and their weapons caused them to go far beyond anything anyone could possibly expect from a mere A ranker.

Ignis’ wielder was known as a hero, and apparently was currently engaged in the act of fighting against the evil forces found on the Goldishian continent.

By contrast, Gaia’s wielder kinda just did his own thing. He wandered from place to place, and would only show up once every few months in order to sell materials, namely ones he harvested from the high ranked magic beasts he happened to come

across on his journeys. Apparently he was last spotted in Chrom, the continent in which the Beastkin's country was located, just earlier this year.

Alpha and Berserk were located in Brohdinn, a continent to the north. The two most powerful kingdoms in Brohdinn each owned one of the two blades. Unsurprisingly, the two aforementioned countries were at each other's necks, but the Godblades kept them in check and prevented them from engaging in any large scale conflict. It'd been several hundred years since they last descended into total war, reason being that they were clearly aware that any conflict that involved two opposing Godblades would cause enormous damage to both parties.

Their knowledge wasn't derived from common sense or logical thought, but instead, first hand experience. The Godblades' wielders had caused over 100,000 deaths when they engaged each other in combat about 300 years prior. The forest in which they fought had been reduced to a mere wasteland, and remained as such to this day.

[That honestly sounds pretty damn terrifying. Where sort of abilities do those two weapons happen to have?]

"Alpha's actually pretty famous, as it grants its wielder the Half-Deify skill."

"Skill effect?"

"I guess the best way to put it would be to say that it causes its wielder to ascend."

"Ascend?"

[Iunno about you, but that doesn't really sound particularly useful or intimidating to me.]

Dias' description was a bit lacking, it didn't allow me to form a decent mental representation of the ability.

"Well, the Half-Deify skill basically raises all the caster's stats and skill levels while also enhancing their body for better performance."

[Ehhh... It still doesn't really sound all that impressive.]

"Doesn't seem strong."

“I do agree that Alpha’s skill sounds somewhat plain but it’s actually said to be the most powerful Godblade. Half-Deify raises its Alpha’s wielder’s stats by a factor of 10. It also allows said wielder to see through every single form of stealth, gaze at things thousands of miles away, and hear every last conversation that happens within an entire country’s confines. Moreover, it immediately maxes all of its wielder’s skills. Does it sound a bit more impressive if I put it like that?”

Okay, yeah. The sword sounded like something that more or less hyper-boosted its wielder while also drawing out their latent potential. I don’t know why I expected anything else from a Godblade.

“They say that a single slash from Alpha’s wielder can tear through a hundred soldiers, a second can fell a rampart, and a third can tear down an entire mountain.”

[That kinda sounds like bullshit, but I’m a bit tempted to believe it given that Alpha’s a Godblade.]

“The most terrifying part about Alpha is that it can keep its wielder in an enhanced state for over half a day. Those that face it are left helpless, all they can do is hope they wake up to find that they were only having a nightmare.”

Wait, it can let its wielder maintain that ridiculously powerful form for over half a day? Holy shit, that’s enough time to raze several major cities, or perhaps maybe even an entire country.

Berserk, the Godblade pitted against Alpha, was just as terrifyingly powerful.

“Berserk’s effects are quite similar to Alpha’s. It enhances its user’s body, raises its user’s stats, and levels up its user’s skills. Moreover, the enhancements it grants are actually even greater than the ones Alpha grants.”

[Wait, are you sure? Why would Alpha be the better Godblade if Berserk’s got a better buff?]

“Berserk is technically stronger from a numerical standpoint, but it can’t be considered the best Godblade because it comes with a dreadful side effect. Its user is deprived of their ability to discern friend from foe and is forced into a homicidal rampage. To make matters worse, it kills its wielder as its effect ends.”

[That sounds pretty nasty, but it seems like it could end up being pretty effective if you just threw its wielder into enemy lines.]

Using the blade sounded inhumane, but also quite efficient.

“Unfortunately, that doesn’t really work. What do you think happens once Berserk’s wielder annihilates all the enemies in its vicinity?”

[Unno, nothing? I’m assuming you could just retrieve the Godblade and call it a day.]

“How exactly are you supposed to retrieve it? Its wielder will attack you if you approach it.”

[I mean, you could just wait for the sword’s effect to fade. It shouldn’t be too hard to retrieve once the wielder dies.]

“You’re right, but who’s to say that the blade’s original owner will be the first to arrive on site?”

Dias had a pretty good point. It was possible for one’s enemies to get to the blade first.

“And that’s not all. Like Alpha, Berserk’s effects also remain for the better half of a day. That’s a long time. There’s been a case in which its wielder ended up making his way back to his own country and razing a large city after demolishing the enemy’s capital. It really isn’t something you can use on the fly. It always causes heavy losses on both sides. That said, it’s the perfect card to use if you find that yourself without any other option.”

In a way, you could say Berserk was like a nuke. You couldn’t really use it without worrying the consequences potentially coming back and biting you in the ass.

“And I’m guessing that’s why the country that has Alpha hasn’t managed to slowly push the country they’re up against into some sort of corner?”

Based on what Dias told us, there wasn’t really any point in attempting to go after any of the Godblades whose locations were known, as they were all possessed by either S rankers or countries. It didn’t seem like it would be possible to buy or steal them from either of the two types of entities mentioned.

[And I'm guessing that's why Celldio was supposed to be looking for Godblades without obvious location markers on them?]

"Exactly. So back on track, there isn't a country out there that doesn't want to be in possession of a Godblade, so there must be a whole slew of information available. That said, I'm surprised the marquis managed to gather as much as he did."

Dias made yet another valid point. Cellio had been provided with a good bit of information regarding the Godblades' appearances and abilities.

The Warmount Blade — Chariot

Charriot's form resembles that of a conductor's baton. It is capable of creating golems of all shapes and sizes and manipulating them thereafter. The golems tend to be made of metal and are capable of both flight and emitting beams of light. It was demonstrated to be capable of simultaneously creating 1000 small golems about 15cm in height each. These golems were able to annihilate over a fleet of ships 100 strong in an instant as per the battle of Gallelia. It was last spotted somewhere on the continent of Kapul.

The Blade of Wisdom — Cherubim

This Godblade has already been destroyed, but its vestiges should be collected if deemed possible. There are no confirmed details regarding its abilities. Investigating the blade through the use of skills has led to the conclusion that it was a sword with an angel engraved onto it. It was likely to have been destroyed in the Kingdom of Kranzel.

The Seeker's Godblade — Explorer

Explorer is shaped like a monocle. One investigation has led to the conclusion that has the ability to perceive the happenings of an entire continent, but there are no confirmed details regarding its precise workings. It was last seen on the continent of Jirbard.

The Blade of Imprisonment — Hell

No confirmed details. The only mention of it is in a 500 year old document that described it being used in Chrom. The location in which it was said to be used is now a barren wasteland in which it is impossible for any sort of organism to thrive. Its abilities are said to relate to the manipulation of poison.

The Raging Dragonblade — Lindwurm

The only confirmed detail is that it is shaped like a sword.

The Moonbeam Blade — Moonlight

Apparently grants its user the ability to repel any and all attacks.

The only really detailed description was the one about Chariot, but even then, it failed to mention any sort of pinpointed location.

“How interesting. Not even I knew much of what was written here. I’m surprised they’re actually even trying to retrieve Cherubim. I presume the marquis’ goal must be to conduct some sort of research...”

[Do you think it’s possible for them to actually learn anything?]

“I can’t draw any conclusions, but I can say that I doubt they’d bother doing something that wouldn’t provide them any benefit. Either way, the marquis keeping his activities a secret raises several major red flags.”

His actions weren’t technically illegal, but there was no doubt that he would be suspected of treason if he started doing research on weapons and kept it a secret from the state.

“Would you mind letting me hang onto this? It’ll serve as a good piece of evidence.”

“Nn. Don’t mind.”

“Thanks.”

I’d already memorized everything that had been written on the sheet anyways.

Chapter 224

How to Travel to the Beastkin's Country

"I really have to say though, you sure do seem to attract trouble. You've already hooked in two different big shots in a single day. To be fair, it should be something you saw coming. You've garnered a lot of attention, and caught a lot of eyes. We as the guild are rather thankful that you're ultimately helping us out, but I'm guessing you don't feel the same."

[Yeah, we kinda would've preferred not to get involved with any of those people at all.]

"Hahahaha, yeah, that's what I thought. Too bad for you, I can guarantee that it's going to keep happening."

"How to make stop?"

"I'm glad you're willing to ask for my advice instead of beating around the bush or thinking you'll just somehow find your way out of every situation. You remember how I told you to go to the Beastkin's Country? My personal advice would be to hurry on your way. Our country's idiots won't be able to do anything to you if you're gone."

[That sounds great and all, but I'm not really sure it'll be that easy for us to just hop over to another continent.]

We probably needed both a ship and a visa if we wanted to make our way over.

"Don't worry about the visa, the guild has you covered on that front. Anyone that has a designated request can use their card as both an entry and exit permit."

Wow, guild cards are a lot more convenient than I thought.

"There'll be a office at the border. The inspector there will have a magic item, and should let you pass so long as you show him your guild card."

"Thanks."

[I guess that means that finding ourselves a ship is all we'll have to worry about.]

"That part will be a bit more difficult. Barbra will probably be your best bet, but I don't think they have any ocean liners in service."

[Huh, that's weird. How do people normally get over to the Beastkin's country then?]

"Most adventurers tend to have merchants hire them as escorts."

[Sounds about right.]

The problem with that was Fran's appearance. I highly doubted anyone would be all that willing to hire her as a guard given that she looked the way she did. If I had to hire an escort, and my options were a kid and a big burly man, I'd definitely choose the latter.

We'd managed to get ourselves an escort mission when going from Dharz to Barbra, but that was only because we'd known Prince Flut, Princess Satia, and Salrut. In other words, we had only managed to hitch ourselves a ride because we had the power of nepotism at hand. We no longer had the connections nec—oh wait.

[We could try asking the guys at the Luciel Conglomerate.]

"...Who?"

[Yeah, I'm not really surprised you've already forgotten them.]

I myself had almost forgotten about them as well. Fran was no good at remembering names, so her having forgotten them was honestly a given.

[You remember how we had to ride a ship in order to get from Dharz to Barbra? The conglomerate is the company that owned the ship, remember? We even got a coin from the captain, one with some sort sort of crest on it.]

"Nn...? Got coin?"

[Yeah, we totally did.]

The conglomerate was one of Barbra's biggest corporations, so there was a pretty good chance they'd have a ship or two heading for Chrom.

"I don't think you'll have any trouble finding yourself an escort job. Merchants are known for their vast information networks, their many connections let them spread and catch wind of information faster than anyone and everyone else. I'm sure Barbra's merchants have already caught wind of your accomplishments."

"Then will have easy time finding ship to escort?"

"I think it'll even be safe to say that they'll be fighting for your attention. That said, it'd probably be best for you to take advantage of *that* connection, than go out of your way to find a ship to the Beastkin's Country that may or may not actually exist."

"Nn?"

[Yeah, good point.]

Fran hadn't seemed to have realized it, but me, I'd already long thought about what Dias was currently suggesting. The connection he was referring to was the one we shared with the Beast Lord.

I hadn't immediately suggested asking him for help because I wasn't sure if it was the best idea.

There were several reasons I thought that to be the case, with the first being that it kind of felt like we were relying on him more than we should've been. I didn't want to be any more in his debt than we already were.

The second was that the Beast Lord probably wasn't planning on heading back to his country immediately. He was a king, one that would probably be met with a warm reception regardless of where he went. Dealing with the people that welcomed him was effectively a part of his job. His personality kinda made it so he wasn't really all that receptive, but Royce and his other companions always seemed to be working to prevent him from acting entirely on his selfish whims. In other words, he probably wouldn't be heading back to his own country for quite some time.

I felt we'd be able to reach our destination much more quickly if we found a ship that'd take us straight there.

Dias, however, was inclined to disagree.

“Your first reason may as well be moot. You’re going to need to ask him a favour anyway, seeing as how you’ll need to pay Kiara a visit.”

[True.]

“The same goes for your other point, I doubt he’d make many stops on his way back.”

[Why’s that?]

“The Beast Lord’s party barely made any stops on the way here. They always made a big show of having the Beast Lord move around in his carriage whenever they entered a town, but they spent the rest of their time as would a normal party of adventurers.”

Their actions made a fair bit of sense to me, as functioning the way they did definitely allowed them to move at a rapid pace. The only issue was that I wasn’t really sure we would be able to keep up with an S ranked party.

That wasn’t the only concern it raised either. There was a chance they’d find out about me if we travelled with them. Beastkin had good intuition, and high ranking adventurers were sharp. The combination of the two traits made me feel like they would definitely catch on if we stayed with them for an extended period of time.

“Well uh... good luck. I don’t really know what else to say to you about that.”

[Yeah, I figured as much.]

That said, I wasn’t really sure whether the Beast Lord would even be willing to let us travel with him in the first place. There was a chance he would just show us to a ship and have us head out without him if we were lucky.

“Will go ask Beast Lord.”

[Yeah, no harm in just asking, I guess.]

“Tell him and his buddies I said hi.”

“Nn.”

Chapter 225

Route Secured

We headed over to the inn the Beast Lord was staying at despite the fact that the sun had already started to set. We really wanted to get this over with and out of the way as soon as possible.

The reason I felt that way was because the Beast Lord struck me as an impatient person. There was a good chance he would just randomly up and leave because he no longer had any business in Ulmutt.

Our biggest blocker was that there was a chance we wouldn't actually be allowed to see him given how late it was. We could always just sneak in, but that wasn't really too great of an idea given he was currently staying at a super high class inn that typically housed royalty and whatnot.

Fortunately, my worries ended up being needless. The inn's staff let us in the moment they heard Fran's name because the Beast Lord had apparently told them to act upon her requests with the highest possible priority.

"Oh, hey Fran. What's up?"

The Beast Lord raised a hand to give us a friendly greeting as we entered his room. The impression he was currently giving off was drastically different from his usual one. He was acting in the same manner as would any other easy-going man in his 30's.

"Did you need me for something?"

"Nn. Looking for ship to visit Beastkin's Country."

"You're planning to head over right away? That's perfect, you can just hitch a ride with us 'cause we're planning to head back soon anyway."

Well uh, that happened.

I honestly wasn't expecting him to immediately give us the green light. Allowing a stranger to join a group that included an incognito king really didn't sound like that great of an idea. Royce seemed to share my opinion, as he immediately joined in on the conversation and voiced a complaint —

“Lord Rig, I believe you have may forgotten to complete one of the tasks on our agenda. You are a royal, and as such, it would be rude for you not to pay the King of Kranzel your respects after visiting his country.”

— Or so I thought. Turned out the reason he was interjecting wasn't because he didn't want Fran to accompany them, but rather, because they had more shit to do before actually leaving.

“Ugh, do I really have to?”

“Of course.”

Royce's point was valid, the Beast Lord clearly had yet to fulfill all his duties as a king. We'd been planning on heading over to Kranzel's royal capital as well, but only because we wanted to take part in the auction. I didn't think it'd be realistic for us to follow him all the way to the royal capital before actually leaving the country, though it did seem like they'd probably hire us as guards if we asked them to.

“Fine, but then how are we supposed to accompany her back?”

“There is no need for us to personally escort her. She's an adventurer, one strong enough to defeat Gold. She'll be able to handle herself.”

“Eh, yeah, I guess you're right.”

“Besides, all she asked for was for us to help her find a ship.”

“Huh, really?”

“Geez. I know that she's about the same age as the princess, and that you've got quite the interest in her, but do pay more attention.”

“Princess?”

“He’s talking about my daughter. She’s 15 this year, and I really can’t help but see a bit of her in you.”

It seemed that the only reason the Beast Lord treated Fran as kindly as he did was because she reminded him of his own daughter.

“That said, I really would love for her to visit our country. I am sure our Master would be delighted to meet her.”

“Right?”

“We would also be able to put her to good use.”

Shit! He just said that right to Fran’s face! I was shocked at first, but a bit of further consideration led me to believe that Royce had said what he had on purpose. He wanted Fran to know that he would be using her for politics’ sake if she decided to visit.

Royce was one of the Beast Lord’s aides, and clearly highly competent. He wasn’t about to let Fran, a Black Catkin that’d actually managed to evolve, slip right through his fingers. He knew and wanted to take advantage of the fact that revealing her to his country’s people would cause their attitudes to make unprecedented swings and changes.

“Will run away if gets too bad.”

“Hahahahaha! They’d probably need to send someone at least as strong as me after you if you actually got serious about wanting to escape our grasp.”

“That’s fine. We are not requesting that you become one of Lord Rig’s vassals, after all. Personally, I was considering that we could just... help each other out. All we need is for you to demonstrate that you and Lord Rig get along.”

Yeah, that doesn’t really sound too bad at all.

“To that end, I will be giving you this.”

“This?”

The thing Royce handed Fran seemed to resemble a thin sheet of metal with some sort of crest engraved on it.

“The item I just gave you is an identification card bearing both Lord Rig’s name and my own. Many of our country’s merchants frequently travel between Barbra and our motherland. The card I just gave you should allow you to board any one of them with ease.”

“Really?”

“Really. Just look for a ship with our crest engraved on it, and you should be good to go.”

It seemed we somehow managed to get ourselves into what we considered the ideal situation. We were pretty much set.

Apparently, Barbra had a boat set sail for the Beastkin’s country about once every three days. The ones we were looking for, the ones with the country’s crest with a crown mounted on top, worked directly under government supervision. Showing them the crest we were given would cause them to not only let us on board, but also treat us as they would a guest of honour.

In other words, they’d given us something much more convenient than what we’d been expecting.

“To be frank, I doubt the crest we’ve given you is even necessary. Most of our country’s merchants have already likely learned both of your name and your appearance. I can all but guarantee that they would allow you to board so long as you just asked.”

That was true and all, but having something that was actually 100% guaranteed was much better than something that was just highly likely.

I was completely satisfied with the whole boat ordeal now, so the only other thing we really wanted to know was the info they promised us about the god-tier blacksmith.

“Question. God-tier blacksmith, located where?”

“That’s something that shouldn’t be too hard to figure out after you get there.”

“We have already issued an order for you to be given a letter of introduction upon your arrival. Unfortunately, that is all we can do. There is no guarantee that the smith will be willing to see you even with the letter.”

“Oh yeah. Try telling that smith to actually handle our shit if she ends up taking a liking to you.” ^[1]

It seemed the god-tier blacksmith had a rather free spirit seeing as how she was willing to turn down even the king’s requests.

I couldn’t really make any guarantees, but personally, I was willing to put in a good word or two for the Beast Lord and his buddies if the blacksmith really did end up liking us, so I didn’t see any issue in accepting their request.

“Nn.”

“Alright, good luck with everything.”

“Our master is currently residing within the palace. You should be able to find her with ease so long as you make your way towards our capital.”

“Got it.”

Chapter 226

Old Man Gallus' Whereabouts

Royce had given us his ID, so we were pretty much set to leave for the Beastkin's Country whenever. Given that, I decided to mull over whether or not we had anything to do before actually setting out.

[Oh yeah, we should probably go check in with Old Man Gallus.]

I remember the other blacksmith telling us that he'd be back by the time the tourney started, so I figured he was probably already in town. The blacksmith in question had even promised to tell us when Gallus finally arrived, but he'd never actually contacted us at all.

There was a pretty good chance that he'd purposefully avoided doing so because he didn't want to bother us because we were busy with the tourney. Given that, I figured we may as well pay his smithy a visit.

"Blacksmith?"

[Yeah, I was thinking we could go check to see whether or not Gallus made it back.]

The sun had only just set, so it seemed to me that it was fine to assume that they'd yet to go to bed. That said, it seemed a bit wrong to visit at this late an hour, so I had us pick up a little something to make seeing us worth their time.

Specifically, we went into a bar that happened to be on the way and bought a bottle of the strongest drink they had. It seemed like the best possible thing we could get seeing as how dwarves and liquor went hand in hand. I was a bit worried that they'd refuse to sell it to us given Fran's age, but apparently that wasn't actually the case. In fact, it was the exact opposite. The bartender had even given Fran a discount in exchange for a handshake because he'd recognized her on sight.

And so, we paid Zadoh, one of Gallus' blacksmith buddies, a visit with booze in hand.

[1]

“Hey there. Grats on third place.”

“Nn. Thanks.”

It turned out that Zadoh had actually watched the tourney.

Our gift seemed to delight him. Apparently, it was some pretty damn high quality stuff.

We asked him about Gallus, but unfortunately Zadoh could only say that the old craftsman had yet to show up in Ulmutt.

“I think Gallus is the only one that hasn’t returned. As far as I know, all the other people that went to help are already back.”

“Only Gallus not back?”

“Yeah. He’s probably stuck up in Barbra doing something only he’s capable of.”

“Okay.”

“Though, it’s a bit weird for him not to at least send word of the delay seeing how he said he’d return by the time the tourney started.”

We were on our way back over to Barbra anyways, so we could probably just look for him again after heading over. I definitely did want to at least greet him before we headed off to the Beastkin’s Country, as there was no way for us to know when we’d next see him if we just upped and left without checking in first.

There wasn’t really much else for us to ask. We turned around and decided to head home, but Zadoh stopped us before we made our way out the door.

“R-Right, so I wanted to ask you about that sword of yours...”

The blacksmith’s gaze was set on me, and seemed to carry the same emotions it had when he first feasted his eyes on Fran’s Black Cat Set.

Zadoh was a skilled craftsman, so it really didn’t take him much to figure out that I was some sort of magic sword. He’d probably been curious about me to begin with. Him

watching the tourney probably hadn't helped either given how the caster kept going on and on about the fact that I was Fran's namesake.

"C-Could I see it for a sec? I promise I won't take too long."

(Master?)

[Sure, I don't mind if he promises to keep it short. Make sure you warn him not to equip me though, cause, y'know.]

"Got it. Here."

"Thanks a bunch."

"Don't equip. Will die from curse."

"Huh?"

"Cursed. Only I can equip without dying."

Zadoh had started moving his hands in my direction, but stopped the moment he heard Fran's warning. His face reflected a clear sense of terror.

I couldn't really blame him. You wouldn't normally want to touch a sword that could potentially kill you if you tried equipping it. It was kinda like how people didn't really like touching poison, even if it was the type that only took effect if you drank it.

Not to brag, but, there was no way Zadoh wasn't aware of the fact that I wasn't just your everyday magic sword. As a result, Fran's warning came off as all the more real.

"W-Would just touching it cause any problems?"

"None."

"A-Alright, good to hear."

The blacksmith had to have been rather curious seeing as how he was the one that asked to see me. Given that, he ended up actually did end up picking me up after seemingly steeling his resolve.

A switch almost seemed to flip within him the moment he did. He cast aside all his nervousness and immediately began to act as one would expect of a professional blacksmith. That is, he began carefully looking over both my guard and blade.

“Hmmm... I can feel an incredible amount of magical power coming from within your sword. Whoever made its blade did it with meticulous care. It seems to be made out of a pretty interesting metal too.”

Zadoh began muttering as he looked me over.

“Would it be okay for me to ask about this magic sword’s source?”

“Source?”

“Yeah. Do you know who made it, or where you found it maybe?”

Zadoh’s questions were more or less the exact ones you’d expect from a pro. That said, I couldn’t actually answer them. I didn’t know who made me, and I didn’t really think it was a good idea to tell him I came from the Maookami Plains.

“Not really.”

I mulled over it a bit, but ended up asking Fran to play it safe.

“That’s too bad... Either way, it looks to me like this thing might actually be made out of an orichalcum alloy.”

“Orichalcum? Blade made of it?”

“Honestly, I can’t say. It’s not made out of something I’m familiar with, which is why I was thinking that was why orichalcum sounded like it’d be a likely contender. Hold on a second.”

Zadoh walked over to one of his smithy’s corners and retrieved a slightly worn book as he spoke.

“This here is something I just happened to get my hands on during the tourney. It contains notes on blacksmiths from the past.”

The tourney would cause merchants to swarm to Ulmutt, which in turn apparently made it fairly easy to find yourself a lucky bargain or two.

“The thing’s apparently written by the apprentice of a god-tier blacksmith’s apprentice. It talks about the different types of metals god-tier blacksmiths have used in the past, and makes particular mention of one called orichalcum. I don’t actually know what exactly orichalcum is, but the book says it’s the only kind of metal that can survive a god-tier blacksmith’s forging process.”

Huh, so something like that actually existed? I was a bit intrigued by the concept of being made of orichalcum, but it didn’t seem quite right.

Orichalcum was, based on what Zadoh said, apparently a sort of ridiculously durable legendary metal. The reason I didn’t think I was made of it was exactly that, it was durable and I wasn’t. My blade broke literally all the time. The only reason I looked to be in perfect condition right now was because I could regenerate.

“To be honest, that guess was just a shot in the dark. There’s lots of metals I don’t know much about, and there’s no doubt that this sword of yours could be made out of any one or combination of them. I only thought that orichalcum was a possibility because the sword seems to give off a sort of dignity. In fact, it almost seems to bear a presence of its own. It’s possible my feelings come from the fact that it’s some sort of top-class magic item.”

Dignity? Damn man, you be saying some good shit right there. Am I just so majestic he can’t help but notice me? Hell yeah! I mean, I guess that does make decent sense. I may not be a godblade, but there really was a fair chance that I was made by some god-tier blacksmith.

Zadoh finished checking me over, handed me back to Fran, and bid us farewell.

It didn’t take long for us to arrive back at the inn thereafter.

The sun had already set, but there were a few things we had to do before going to bed. Namely, Fran had yet to bathe or eat.

And that wasn’t it either. There was something I wanted to check, something I’d been putting off.

[Well, here goes.]

“Nn.”

The thing in question was checking the effects of my Doppelganger Synthesis skill.

I casted the skill expecting to create a couple cloth-covered humans, but was instead greeted by a series of blades.

[Yeah, looks like I spawned swords again.]

“Nn. Many Masters.”

Doppelganger Synthesis seemed to have started spawning swords instead of humans for some odd reason.

I tried casting the skill several times, only to learn that it was indeed possible for me to create human doppelgangers, but only if I focused on it. Likewise, it was possible for me to create both swords and humans simultaneously, a discovery that allowed us to usher in a whole new wave of strategies.

That said, the skill didn't seem to be working the exact way I expected. For some odd reason, the human-shaped doppelgangers I created didn't seem quite right. They looked like me, but they also kinda didn't. Something just seemed... off.

It wasn't anything too disorienting though, so I ended up just writing it off as a consequence of me becoming capable of creating sword-shaped doppelgangers.

The reason I was willing to write it off almost right away was because frankly, I don't really care about having a human form. I'd already long made up my mind and decided I would live out the rest of my life as a sword. All that mattered to me was that my human-shaped doppelgangers didn't suffer any sort of performance loss.

[Alright. We talked to everyone we needed to talk to, and we've got pretty much everything ready. You think it's about time?]

“Nn. Time to go to Beastkin's Country.”

Chapter 227

Goodbye Ulmutt

Today was the day we planned to leave Ulmutt.

The first thing we did after getting out of bed and finishing up our morning routine was paying Rumina a visit so we could say our goodbyes.

“The time I spent with you was both eventful and enjoyable.”

“Later.”

“Farewell. Do enjoy yourselves in the Beastkin’s Country.”

“Nn...”

“I believe it is quite sunny today. It appears to be the perfect time to depart, and to that end, I do hope that your expression will brighten to match the weather.”

The two weren’t going to part for good or anything, but it seemed like Fran couldn’t help but feel a bit sad regardless.

“Thank you for informing me of Kiara’s whereabouts. I would have never located her if not for your efforts. I understand that this is not my first time making the statement, but I would like to reiterate it in order to express my gratitude.”

“Also grateful. For evolution.”

[What she said. Helping us out seemed to have ended up weakening you quite a bit. You sacrificed a lot for us, we really do owe you a ton.]

“It appears that our feelings are mutual. As that is the case, I see no harm in calling off our debts to one another.”

Rumina smiled cheerfully as she spoke, but Fran ended up frowning in response.

“Please don’t make that face, Fran. I can assure you that our paths will cross again. It would ease my heart to see you depart this place with a smile.”

“Nn...”

“It appears that you really cannot go without being spoiled.”

Rumina got up out of her seat, approached the younger black catkin and gave her a full on hug. Fran responded to it burying her face in Rumina’s chest and returning the embrace.

They stuck together for a while, but Rumina eventually dislodged Fran by tapping her on the back.

The younger girl’s face had a pretty rare look on it in the sense that it was tinted with a slight shade of red. She’d clearly felt a bit embarrassed.

“Sorry.”

“Fuhaha. ‘Twas rather adorable of you. Feel free to return to my side if you ever feel yourself tinged with loneliness. I will be willing to provide you as many hugs as you wish for.”

“Nn.”

All the uneasiness had left Fran’s face. Rumina had fulfilled a duty I normally would’ve been responsible for in a way I could never have possibly managed. I felt kinda conflicted in the sense that I both admired her ability to do so, and was frustrated that I couldn’t do anything at all for Fran.

“Time to go.”

“Indeed it is. Stay safe, and enjoy your journey.”

And so, Rumina saw us out the dungeon with a smile.

Fran ended up opening her mouth and speaking one last time right as we began to teleport.

“Bye bye.”

It almost seemed to be something she hadn't intentionally said, something that had just so happened to leak out.

[We'll definitely pay her a visit sometime in the future.]

“Nn.”

[And we'll definitely make sure we grow enough to give her a bit of a shock.]

“Nn!”

We arrived at Ulmutt's gate about an hour later, only to find ourselves surrounded by a decently sized group of people.

“Do come back Fran! I'll welcome you with open arms anytime!”

Erza was the first person to call out to us; he immediately leapt at and glomped Fran as he began to cry. She ended up letting out a “mmrph” sound as he pulled her into his thick, burly chest, but she didn't end up really minding his actions even though snot had begun dribbling from his nose. In fact, she'd even ended up patting him on the back in order to soothe him.

“Sniffles... Thanks Fran.”

“Nn.”

“I have a parting gift I'd like to give you.”

Erza handed Fran a basket with ten liquid filled bottles within.

“Potions?”

“I made you some beauty cream. It'll keep your skin soft and smooth so long as you apply a bit of it before going to bed. You're really strong Fran, and cool too, but make sure you never lose sight of being as cute a girl as you can be, mkay?”

“Nn?”

Erza’s advice was pretty solid, and I really appreciate the sentiments that drove him. Fran was pretty damned adorable, even to start with. Unfortunately, she was stuck with me as her guardian, so she didn’t normally end up making use of her beauty due to a lack of exposure to both makeup and fashion.

The 10 bottles we were given would last us a pretty good while, so I was going to have Fran start using them from today onwards.

“Smear on skin?”

“Mhm. All you have to is put a dot of it on your palm and then massage it into your skin.”

“Why?”

“Listen here girl. I know you might not see why you’d bother as of right now, but just do it. I promise you you’ll understand once you grow up and fall in love.”

“Nn? Okay...?”

Fran nodded, but her expression belied the fact that she had absolutely no idea what was going on.

Huh, right, Fran will fall in love one day, won’t sh- wait a second.

Dude, Erza, Fran’s still only 12...

Isn’t it like, a little bit kinda maybe too early for her to fall in love?

I could say for sure that Fran would end up being pretty damned popular with the guys if Erza’s beauty cream worked to enhance her looks the way I was thinking it would. There was no doubt in my mind that all sorts of dudes would flock to her like bees to honey.

A part of me couldn’t help but worry that some of the aforementioned men would end up being so good looking that they’d make Fran fall in love with them at first sight. I knew that I’d be able to cut those individuals down without hesitation if they ended

up being scumbags on the inside, but I couldn't say the same for people that ended up being just as good inside as they were outside. I couldn't help but wonder what I would end up doing if I actually judged their personalities to be amicable enough to be worth Fran's affections. Would I be able to entrust her to them?

My immediate reaction was a big no. Fran needed someone strong enough to protect her, someone capable of besting her in combat even with me equipped. I absolutely refused to approve of them unless they were both at least that strong, fairly financially stable, fully willing to commit to a monogamous relationship, and capable of fulfilling every single last one of her wishes.

"H-Hey Fran, are okay? That amazing cursed sword of yours just started shaking all on its own."

(Master?)

Shit, that was close. I seemed to have momentarily lost control of myself, as I'd started unconsciously casting telekinesis.

[I-It's nothing. You should probably thank Erza.]

I didn't really have to concern myself with the thought for the time being, as romantic love seemed to be something Fran wouldn't experience for quite some time. There was no point to not accepting Erza's gift, there was no real harm in Fran getting even cuter than she was already.

"Nn. No problem. Thanks."

"I'll make you more when you run out, so stop by when you do!"

"Got it."

The next two people to call out to us, Dias and Aurel, came as a pair.

"Heya. Looks like you picked a pretty good day to set off. The weather's looking great."

"Take care of yourself out there."

They bowed to Fran and thanked her for the whole Kiara fiasco. I was expecting them

to hand us letters, but they didn't end up doing so.

"We still remember her as vividly as we would have had we seen each other just yesterday, but the opposite may not necessarily hold true."

"To her, we were just another pair of unreliable adventurers. There's a good chance she's long forgotten about us."

To me, their situation almost sounded a bit depressing, but they didn't seem to mind. The looks on their faces suggested that they thought of it as only natural, and hence, they weren't planning to send her any letters.

"We would like you to mention us, but that's it. All you really have to say is that some of the adventurers that she used to know miss her."

"Nn. Got it."

The next group Fran was approached by consisted of Amanda, Forrund, Fermus, and Colbert. The half-elf, who was at the group's front, greeted Fran with a hug.

"It looks like we're going to have to say our goodbyes again, Fran. I'm really going to miss you..."

Amanda cried much in the same manner as Erza, minus the snot. Her beauty and grace made her much girlier than- Okay no, I'd better just stop there and write Erza off as an exception of sorts.

"Farewell."

Forrund was short and to the point, just as he'd been back in Barbra. In a sense, one could say that he bore a slight resemblance to Fran.

Honestly, I hadn't even expected him to come see us off.

"Is that not a bit *too* blunt of you, Forrund?"

Colbert's tone clearly conveyed that he was taken aback by Forrund's greeting.

"Sorry Fran, Forrund always acts like that, so please do not think ill of him."

“No problem.”

“Hahaha, I do have to say, the two of you are quite similar with regards to your mannerisms. Forrund tends to like strong adventurers, he is here today because of the favourable impression you left on him.”

“Yeah.”

“Nn.”

“One day.”

“Got it.”

“I have the feeling that putting the two of you together might not be the best idea.”

Colbert shuddered, and for a good reason at that.

The two were conversing in a manner that no one but them could understand. Despite that, they seemed to be communicating losslessly.

“Was Barbra your next destination, Fran?”

“Nn.”

“In that case, I’d like for you to have this. It’s a pass that’ll get you a free meal at my restaurant. Please do stop by.”

Oh nice. That’s a pretty damned good present. Fran really seemed to have enjoyed the stuff she ate at The Dragon’s Table.

“Thanks.”

“I am going to be training myself from the ground up again, so I will not lose the next time we fight.”

Colbert declared that he wished to duel Fran again in the future, which prompted her to immediately respond as any other battle maniac would.

“Bring it on.”

Amanda finally released Fran after we did a good chunk of conversing.

“I’m going to be going to the Beastkin’s Country too.”

Thinking back, Amanda had actually said something similar when we left Alessa. Unfortunately for her, that simply wasn’t something she was permitted to do.

“Not happening.”

“I highly doubt that you will be allowed to do so.”

“It definitely won’t happen.”

All three of the men accompanying her shot down Amanda’s idea the moment she voiced it. She went on to state that she at least wanted to accompany us back to Barbra, but she had duties to attend to in Alessa, and as such, her three companions ended up dragging her away.

“See you later Fran!”

The last group to approach was the Beast Lord’s.

“Make sure you get along with my daughter if you happen to run into her. She’s a bit of a tomboy, but a good girl anyways.”

I was fine with the idea of having Fran make friends with the Beast Lord’s daughter, but his phrasing had me worried. *He* of all people had called her a tomboy, so I couldn’t help but suspect her to be on the wilder side.

We spoke to Royce, Goldalfa, and Roche in that order, before finally moving on to Zefmate, who immediately offered Fran a handshake.

“It seems I caused you a lot of trouble.”

“Nn.”

“I’m going to be one of the Beast Lord’s attendants from now on. I’m planning to train by his side, and grow much stronger. I swear I’ll at least force you to make use of the abilities you obtained from evolving the next time we duel.”

Zefmate seemed to have a lot of potential. Training by the Beast Lord’s side would definitely serve to turn him into a powerful foe to face.

“Both my tribe and I plan to start over. We’ll show you that we can change for the better.”

“High expectations.”

“That’s good. I’ll make sure I uphold them.”

Zefmate was one of the Blue Cat Tribe’s most influential members. I was sure that, going forward, his work would reduce the number of Blue Catkin involved in the slave trade.

Fran firmly grasped the Blue Leopardkin’s hand and shook it for quite the extended duration, a demonstration of her trust in his success.

“Leaving now.”

“See ya.”

“Nn.”

Fran leapt atop Urushi’s back after letting go of Zefmate’s hand.

“Urushi.”

“Woof!”

She got ready to go, but made sure to give the group that’d come to say their goodbyes one last wave before actually leaving.

“Later?”

“Baaiii!”

“See you soon!”

Urushi began to run, with Erza’s and Amanda’s particularly loud voices trailing in the wind behind him, as we once again set off on a journey.



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